

# **The PhD Viva:**

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**Unfolding the practices and experiences  
of doctoral examiners in Malaysia**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis reports on a study of the examiner practices and experiences of the PhD viva from the perspective of doctoral examiners in Malaysia. The PhD viva is an oral examination used compulsorily as part of the assessment for the award of the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), alongside the written thesis examination. In view of the rapid expansion of doctoral education worldwide including Malaysia, there is a need to understand the assessment process and outcome. Despite the assessment, in which examiners are the linchpin, being a critical step to ensure the successful completion of a doctorate, the PhD viva remains disputable. This is due to the obscure nature of the oral examination practices of examiners which are likely to give rise to controversy. While some evidence exists about the practices of examiners, how and what examiners examine and how they experience the PhD viva within a Malaysian doctoral education context are areas yet underexplored, but for which evidence is needed.

Using narrative inquiry as the guiding research approach to investigate this issue, 12 experienced doctoral examiners from across the disciplines at a Malaysian research university were interviewed. The interviews, which formed the primary data for this study, were semi-structured, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. In addition, institutional narrative, which served as secondary data, were drawn from the university's doctoral assessment policy documents, informal conversations with university colleagues, and follow-up communication with some of the examiners. To help to make sense of the examiners' practices and their experiences of the viva, the data were analysed by using thematic analysis, a qualitative data analysis method, guided by narrative and constructivist theory.

In making sense of the practices of examiners, it was found that examiners perceived the viva as serving multiple purposes: gatekeeping, empowerment, dialogue, and enculturation, and not just an assessment. To achieve these purposes, examiners expected candidates to have confident, interactional behaviours, provide credible and convincing argumentative responses, as well as to display doctoralness in their oral performance, which means examiners expect to see an independent researcher/scholar in the viva. Such examining practices of examiners should be explicitly informed.

With regard to the experiences of examiners, it was found that examiners learned to examine mainly from their own experience instead of institutional training, and examiners did face different challenges, such as examining with other examiners and examining the candidates in the viva. The findings reveal complicated examiner practices and experiences of the viva and suggest that a stronger emphasis on examiner preparation to cultivate effective examining practices is essential. Three training initiatives are therefore proposed to support examiners. These include a professional development program (PDP), a peer review of the viva and an accreditation program. Training for examiners is thus called for.

The study not only adds a Malaysian perspective to what is known of the PhD viva in doctoral education worldwide by connecting narrative insights with the practices and experiences of examiners in Malaysia, but it also offers useful pedagogical and training insights, especially for examiners and academic developers, who support doctoral supervisors and examiners. Such insights could be further applied to other similar institutional and doctoral education contexts. Lastly, it provides a base for future research on examiner experiences and doctoral assessment within the field of higher education.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

At the commencement of my PhD candidature, I had an informal conversation at a research seminar with Stan, an academic and PhD examiner, about his examining practice of the PhD viva. Below is an excerpt recreated from the conversation:

Me: How do you know when a candidate has defended successfully in the viva?

Stan: Hmm ... I know it when I see it.

Me: But what does that mean?

Stan: I don't know.

From the exchange above, Stan appeared to know how to examine a candidate in the PhD viva, but could not explain the exact assessment criteria used in determining a successful defence. Admittedly, Stan may have needed more time to formulate a clear response, but it started me thinking. I wondered if Stan's assessment criteria for the viva might be idiosyncratic, and whether different examiners would use a different set of criteria. When I referred to studies in doctoral assessment, I found that Stan's response was not unique. It parallels an earlier conversation with examiners on the topic of contribution to knowledge (Delamont, Atkinson & Parry, 2000). Whether a contribution to knowledge has been made is a defining criterion used by PhD examiners in doctoral assessment. However, when asked what an original contribution for the PhD meant, the examiners in Delamont et al.'s (2000) study reported that they knew one when they saw one—they could not clearly define the criterion.

These examiners' views on original contribution, together with Stan's response about the criteria used in the PhD viva, illustrate why the examination process is likely to give rise to controversy—it has an element of subjectivity. This can have negative consequences for the assessment and the novice doctoral education community. For example, disparities between examiners may occur when different assessment criteria are applied, with implications for the process and outcome of the assessment. My conversation with Stan thus raised a few questions for me about the PhD viva, doctoral assessment and examiner practices. By exploring the issue of examiner practices further, this thesis contributes to the discussion on examiner practices and experiences of the PhD viva in Malaysia from the perspective of doctoral examiners, with implications for examiner preparation.

## **1.1 The PhD Viva and Examiners**

The PhD viva is central to doctoral assessment and acts as a rite of passage for a doctorate. It is employed globally for different purposes (Carter, 2008; Jackson & Tinkler, 2001; Kyvik, 2014; Powell & Green, 2007; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000), including examination, development and ritual (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004), with examination being its predominant purpose. The goal of the viva in doctoral assessment is to reach an outcome of pass, re-viva or fail; the doctoral community is ostensibly aware of this goal and the examination process. Examiners in particular, as essential members of the doctoral community, appointed by the university to participate in the doctoral assessment, are expected to know what and how to examine effectively in the PhD viva to achieve its goal. However, this assumption is problematic for three reasons:

- 1) A complete understanding of the PhD viva is impossible due to the black-box nature of the oral examination in higher education. It is predominantly conducted in private, especially in the universities in the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand and Malaysia (Carter, 2008; Powell & Green, 2007; & Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). Only the members who have taken part in the viva will know the actual assessment and scenario that occurs behind closed doors (Tinkler & Jackson, 2002; Wellington, 2010). Due to limited understanding of this private event, each viva seems to be conducted differently, resulting in divergent viva practices (Morley, Leonard & David, 2002; Park, 2003). The variations in institutional doctoral assessment policies and practices, and the variations in the quality of work, examiners, students and disciplinary expectations, therefore merit further investigation.
  
- 2) There seems to be diversity among examiners in how they approach the viva. This is largely because of the lack of transparency around the viva (Park, 2003). There is patchy literature, as well as much anecdotal evidence, on examiner practices and how poorly they are defined. A synthesis of the literature indicates that while some examiners approach the viva like a collegial chat, many approach it like an examination or interrogation (e.g. Carter, 2008; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004; Wallace & Marsh, 2001). Stories also circulate of maverick examiners and verbal abuse in the PhD viva. With variations in how the PhD viva is examined seemingly inevitable (Morley, Leonard & David, 2002; Park, 2003), this raises concerns regarding the fair treatment of students, and consistency and standardisation of examiner practices in doctoral assessment (Kyvik, 2014).

3) Although training for examiners is starting to be introduced at a number of institutions, examiners often have limited access to opportunities to learn how to examine during the viva. Despite the high stakes of this oral examination, few formal examiner accreditation options are available either from higher education institutions or the agencies monitoring doctoral qualifications in their countries. For instance, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) monitors and regulates the doctoral examination in the UK by providing information on what examiners should do (QAA, 2012), but it does not seem to provide hands-on training on how to examine. Appointed examiners are expected to participate in the viva and complete the doctoral assessment without any formal training. The situation is similar in Malaysia. This raises issues of validity and reliability related to whether examiners know how to approach the viva effectively.

The three reasons given above are about why it cannot be assumed examiners know what and how to examine in the viva as these raise concerns for understanding the PhD viva, examiners and their assessment practices. Existing studies, such as those of Jackson and Tinkler (2001), Park (2003), Tinkler and Jackson (2000, 2004) and Trafford and Leshlem (2002) have tried to investigate some of the issues related to doctoral examination such as the purposes of the viva and viva questions (see Chapter Two); however, given the complex nature of the topic, their studies were not conclusive and unresolved issues remain. Further research into the PhD viva and examiners' practices is thus vital, especially considering the rapid growth in the number of students pursuing their PhDs worldwide, and thus completing vivas (OECD, 2013). For example, statistics from the OECD show a substantial increase in

students pursuing PhDs between 2000 (3336 students) and 2011 (8073 students) in New Zealand. Similarly, the number of PhD enrolments for students in Malaysia increased significantly between 2002 (3882 students) and 2015 (32382 students) (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2016). This suggests a staggering trend towards pursuing a PhD, thus warranting further investigation.

Another point supporting this research on the PhD viva is the increased attention it is receiving in doctoral assessment research. While conducting the current study, it was found that a group of researchers in Australia had obtained an Australian Research Council grant of AUD 194,000 and started a large-scale study in 2012 titled, *A cross-national study of the relative impact of an oral component on PhD examination quality, language and practice*. The aim of their study was to examine the impact of the viva in doctoral assessment to inform policy and practice in Australia. This indicates that the PhD viva is a research-worthy topic (see Lovat et al., 2015). Another research topic that has attracted recent attention is examiner practices. Different issues have been explored, such as examining theses and theses with publication work (e.g. Bourke & Holbrook, 2013; Holbrook, Bourke & Fairbairn, 2015; Sharmini, Spronken-Smith, Golding & Harland, 2015). This shows a growing research interest in doctoral assessment and examiner practices; a conversation the current study aims to join by providing a window into the private oral examination that is the PhD viva and the often unclear and unregulated practices of examiners.

The insights offered by this study are important for three main reasons. First, this study enhances the theoretical understanding of the practices and experiences of examiners in the PhD viva within a Malaysian context. It contributes to a growing area of research in

examiner experiences and doctoral assessment (e.g. Carter, 2008; Clark & Lunt, 2014; Kiley & Mullins, 2004; Kyvik, 2014; Lovat et al., 2015; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004) and contributes to a larger picture of understanding academics and their work in higher education (e.g. Akerlind & McAlpine, 2015; Brew, 2010; Halse, 2011; Lee, 2008; Nicholls, 2007).

Second, this study's findings offer practical benefits for academics, particularly academic developers. Equipped with a better understanding of examiner practices and experiences, academic developers could take up the proposal for improving professional development learning to support academics (e.g. Brew, 2010; Harland & Staniforthb, 2003; Pearce, 2005; Pearson & Brew, 2010; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). This would subsequently benefit academics involved in the PhD viva and doctoral assessment (Wisker & Kiley, 2014). For novice examiners, they could use the findings as a reference alongside other existing literature to inform their examining practices. For experienced examiners, knowledge of the practices of other examiners would help them to reflect on their experiences and adjust their approach to the viva if necessary, as well as help them to prepare their own PhD candidates for the oral examination.

Lastly, for researchers in higher education, the study serves as an impetus to further research on the topic of the PhD viva and examiner practices. For example, the PhD viva could be researched from an academic discourse perspective, or an interdisciplinary study of examiner practices in the viva could be undertaken. In this way, a better research-informed understanding of the doctoral assessment and examiner practices could be arrived at.

## **1.2 Research Context: Malaysia**

This study is situated in Malaysia and hence its PhD education is reviewed to provide the context of the study. The PhD education in Malaysia is relatively young but undergoing expansion. Historically, Malaysia established its first public research university, University of Malaya, in 1949. It was believed to offer the PhD programme in various fields after its inception of the Institute of Graduate Studies in 1979 to promote postgraduate education, under the leadership of the university vice-chancellor Sir Alexander Oppenheim, a British mathematician (University of Malaya, 2018). Since then, a number of public universities, such as the University of Science, National University of Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, and University of Technology were formed and offered PhD programmes in the country. These universities were ranked world's top 40 best universities under 50 years old in the Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings 2016/2017. To date, there are about 733 universities and colleges in Malaysia, and at least 27 public and private universities are offering the PhD programmes.

The PhD education at the Malaysian universities is generally modelled after the universities in the world. Hawkins (2013) argue that the university is a Western creation, and universities, particularly from Asia tend to adopt and emulate academic models and world-class institutions. The National University of Malaysia is one such exemplar. Its mode of study and the PhD requirements are similar to those offered at the UK and US universities. For instance, two modes of the PhD are available at the National University of Malaysia—coursework and thesis and research only. Students who enrolled for a PhD are usually given a minimum duration of six semesters or three years for completion. Students are expected to take a number of courses, except for those who opt for PhD research only, take part in

proposal defence, produce a thesis, pass the comprehensive examinations, as well as passing the doctoral assessment. This mode of study and the PhD requirements are typical and can be observed in other universities in Malaysia.

The doctoral assessment policies and practices, as a crucial part of the PhD education, are to a large extent, similar in public universities in Malaysia. These universities have identical assessment tasks, composition of examination committee and assessment procedures. The doctoral assessment involved two tasks—written thesis examination and the viva. The examination committee for the doctoral assessment is usually comprised of three examiners—one external examiner and two internal examiners in which the external is normally from abroad. The examiners are not supervisors. This can be observed in the University of Science and Universiti Putra Malaysia, for example. However, only a minimum of two examiners – one internal and one external is needed for the doctoral assessment at the National University of Malaysia.

Despite the similarities in doctoral assessment, there exists variations in terms of the composition of members and conduct of the viva. Examiners are invited to examine the thesis and take part in the viva, except the external examiners who are not required to be present in the viva. Once the external examiners have submitted their examination reports of the thesis independently, their assessment job ends. The viva will be held in the presence of the internal examiners. However, there is an exception to this. The University of Technology requires both the internal and external examiners to be present at the viva, as stated in their Graduate Studies Rules and Regulations. On the other hand, the PhD viva in public universities, such as the University of Malaya and Universiti Putra Malaysia is private and

conducted behind closed door. Only members who are involved take part in the viva. Nevertheless, University of Science allows public to watch the viva in progress, which is not a common practice in other public universities.

Variations in the doctoral assessment policies and practices at the Malaysian universities are unsurprising. In fact, it is a norm for universities worldwide, such as in the UK (Tinkler & Jackson 2000, in Canada (Chen, 2008), and in Australia (Kiley, 2009a). Since there are many Malaysian universities offering the PhD programmes, universities have the responsibility to ensure the education and assessment its provide to students are of quality, given the recognised prestige of the PhD worldwide, the increase number of postgraduates pursuing PhD in Malaysia, the increased pressure for examiners to examine the PhD, and the need to uphold the Malaysian government's aspiration to become an education hub, especially in the region of South East Asia. These ideas will be discussed further in Chapter Two. Therefore, to ensure quality in the PhD education in Malaysia and to provide awareness to its stakeholders, the doctoral assessment, in terms of its policies and practices need to be reviewed.

### **1.3 Research Purpose and Questions**

This study contributes to the field of higher education by exploring the examining practices and experiences of doctoral examiners who have taken part in the PhD viva within a Malaysian doctoral education context. It serves two descriptive and practical purposes.

The first purpose was to investigate the examining practices and experiences of examiners in the PhD viva. Evidence from the literature shows that examiners and students

are often confused because they do not know the exact practices in the viva (Tinkler & Jackson, 2002). Thus, scrutinising the experiences of examiners gives insight into the PhD viva process. It also answers partly, if not completely, Jackson and Tinkler's research call for 'increased transparency of procedures, and the provision of greater guidance for candidates, supervisors and examiners about PhD examining' (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004, p. 356) by listening to the voices of examiners. Further, by adding to the growing conversation about doctoral assessment through contributing a Malaysian perspective to the western-dominated literature (mainly from the UK and Australia; e.g. Mullins & Kiley, 2002; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000), this study helps to paint a richer picture of doctoral education practices worldwide (Powell & Green, 2007).

The second purpose of the study was to explore the doctoral examiners' learning experiences, to support examiner preparation and inform training programs. While examiners play a pivotal role in the viva and doctoral assessment, they generally have not received any training in how to examine. Examiners' practice is usually based on their own perspectives and experiences (Wisker & Kiley, 2014), and is thus subject to variance (Morley et al., 2002; Park, 2003). The unregulated and unmonitored nature of examiner practice could be problematic. Therefore, discovering how examiners learn and what and how to examine will have implications for examiner preparation and doctoral assessment, potentially ensuring quality, if not standardised, assessment practices in the PhD viva.

To achieve the research purposes, two major guiding research questions and five sub-questions were formulated.

**Primary research question:** What are the examination practices and experiences of examiners in the PhD viva within a Malaysian university?

*Sub-question 1:* What are examiners' conceptualisations of the purposes of the viva?

*Sub-question 2:* What are examiners' expectations of the candidates' oral performance in the viva?

*Sub-question 3:* How do examiners learn to examine in the viva?

*Sub-question 4:* What are some of the examination challenges encountered by the examiners?

**Secondary research question:** How can the knowledge gained from the examiners inform practice and training?

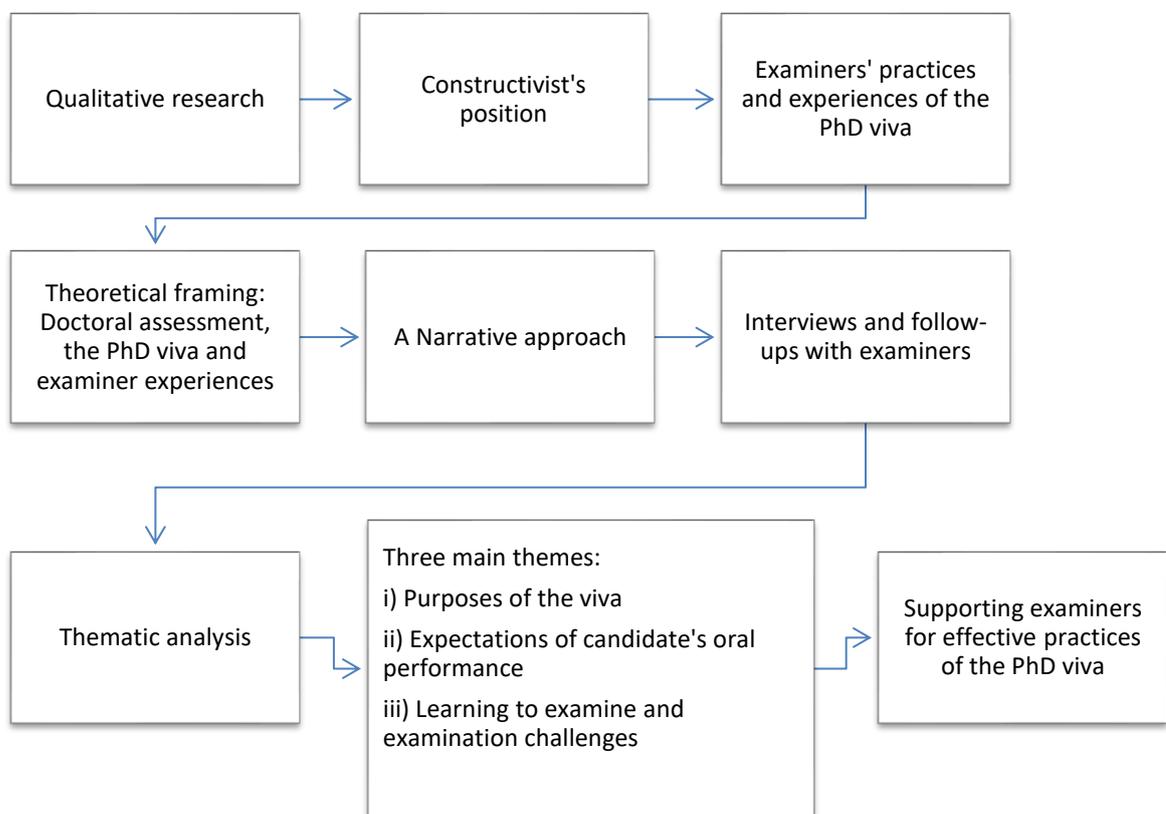
*Sub-question 5:* How should examiners and their practices in the PhD viva be supported by the university towards effective assessment?

I propose that noticing and highlighting the perspectives and experiences of examiners not only could advance the understanding of assessment practices in the PhD viva in Malaysia, but such understanding could also support doctoral examiners in performing their viva assessments and contribute to improved doctoral assessment.

## **1.4 Research Design**

The current study was conducted within the qualitative research tradition and is discussed from my constructivist position. Using a narrative research approach, interviews with 12 examiners across the disciplines from a Malaysian research university were collected and analysed (see Chapter Three). The narratives obtained from the examiners constituted the primary data in this study and were interpreted through the theoretical framing of doctoral

assessment, the PhD viva, examiner experiences, constructivism and narrative inquiry (see Chapters Two and Three). Three main themes are discussed. These include the purposes of the viva, expectations of the candidate's oral performance, as well as learning to examine and the challenges of examining. These findings may provide useful understanding of examiners' practices and support examiners for effective practices in the PhD viva. See Figure 1 for a diagrammatic illustration of the qualitative research design of the study.



**Figure 1.** A qualitative research design of the study

## 1.5 Motivation for the Study

The current study is motivated by my researcher background in the field of applied linguistics<sup>1</sup>, with an aim to contribute to higher education. Here I provide an account of the research conception, starting with the topic of the PhD viva. Then, I explain the emergence of my research focus on examiner practices and experiences. This outline will assist in understanding how this study was conducted.

I first became interested in the PhD viva due to being constantly bombarded with negative descriptions of the event. In 2009, I co-facilitated a workshop titled *Preparing for Your Viva* at a Malaysian research university. Many postgraduate students who attended the workshop shared negative viva stories. When I asked the workshop attendees what they knew about the viva, they described it as a closed-door question-and-answer session that is likely to be unpleasant in many ways. This perception was often shaped by stories from postgraduates who had survived the viva terror, and these stories also shaped my perceptions, having not taken part in the viva myself.

While doing background research on the viva, I was intrigued by the pejorative metaphors used. The viva was described as ‘a gun fight’, ‘a final hurdle’, ‘a battle field’ and ‘a grilling session’ in the literature (e.g. Wallace, 2003). These metaphors gave the impression of the viva as a violent confrontation. To pass the viva, candidates needed to fight to answer the questions posed by the examiners. The candidates had to demonstrate and

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<sup>1</sup> Applied linguistics is an interdisciplinary field of linguistics that identifies, investigates and offers solutions to language-related real-life problems.

convince the examiners verbally of their knowledge contribution and mastery of research skills. Sometimes, the viva could turn into an interrogation if examiners were not satisfied with the candidate's responses, owing to examiners having more power and control in the viva than candidates. Candidates were expected to respond to the satisfaction of the examiners, with unsatisfactory responses affecting the assessment outcome. These initial findings clearly pointed to the tensions and issues surrounding the PhD viva.

Therefore, I proposed a study to explore the discourse of the PhD viva, drawing on my background in applied linguistics. My initial proposal was to collect first-hand accounts of the PhD viva by observing and recording ongoing vivas, and analysing the data from the perspective of pragmatics, a sub-field of applied linguistics, in an attempt to make sense of the language and practices of the PhD viva team (i.e. the chair, examiners and PhD candidate). However, this was not possible despite formal application being granted from the targeted Malaysian research university. Therefore, I changed my research direction and method and instead conducted interviews with examiners on their practices in the PhD viva.

While researching on the practices of the viva, unclear examiner practices emerged as a key issue. Examiners are the gatekeepers of the PhD viva; they influence the conduct and outcome of the oral examination, but how they examine and make decisions is undisclosed. The literature on examiner practices is emerging gradually, with most studies focussing on the written thesis examination (e.g. Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbain & Lovat, 2007; Mullins & Killey, 2002; Sharmini, Spronken-Smith, Golding & Harland, 2015). Since little has been documented about examiner practices in the viva, I wondered how examiners carry out their duty in the viva, and what is expected of them.

After identifying this gap, my curiosity continued to grow. I realised that, despite the important and powerful role examiners play in the viva, their voices are rarely heard or documented in the literature. Their experiences and practices are not normally known except through the interpretation of the negative viva stories from postgraduate students. Thus, narratives of these examiners' experiences were needed to provide insights into doctoral assessment and how examiners examine in the PhD viva. This could also have pedagogical implications for examiner preparation. Therefore, this study was developed to provide these insights into examiner practices and experiences of the PhD viva. I argue that the examiners' practices and viewpoints matter, and highlight the perspectives of examiners to make sense of the doctoral assessment discourse as my contribution to this developing research area.

## 1.6 Definition of Terms

The operational definitions of the terms and concepts used in this study are presented below. Chapters Two and Three include discussion of how these definitions were derived.

<b>Terms</b>	<b>Operational Definitions</b>
<b>PhD viva</b>	An oral examination and communication event in doctoral assessment. The term 'viva' or 'viva voce' is commonly used in the UK and Malaysia to refer to any oral examination including the viva at the PhD level. It is also known as thesis defence in the US and oral examination in New Zealand.
<b>Doctoral examiners</b>	The assessors appointed by the institution to assess and decide the outcome of doctoral assessment.
<b>Examiner practices</b>	Tasks in doctoral assessment to achieve outcomes.

<b>Terms</b>	<b>Operational Definitions</b>
<b>Narratives</b>	Can be autobiographical (personal experiences), recount experiences (e.g. of examining in the PhD viva), stories, or be co-constructed by the teller and listener.
<b>Doctoral assessment</b>	Examination of thesis and oral examination.
<b>Doctoral training</b>	Focuses on the process of becoming an independent researcher, equipped with research skills such as choosing research methods, and ready for the workforce.
<b>Doctoral education</b>	Training aiming towards a doctoral degree.

## 1.7 Outline of the Chapters

In this chapter, I have set the scene for the study by problematising the PhD viva and examiner practices and revealing my interest in examiner practices in the PhD viva. I have also outlined the rationales for the study, explained the research purposes and stated the research questions that I intend to answer.

The remaining chapters are organised as follows. In Chapter Two, I review pertinent literature that informs the research question of the thesis. Three bodies of literature are reviewed: PhD assessment, viva and doctoral examiner research. I first situate the thesis in the research context of Malaysian doctoral education, by discussing its aims and assessment. Next, I synthesise and present a critique of the existing studies on doctoral viva and doctoral examiners, to argue for a new line of inquiry, upon which this thesis is based.

In Chapter Three, I elaborate on the qualitative research methodology and narrative inquiry that I employed for this thesis. I then describe my positionality as a constructivist researcher and a Malaysian research university, MY University as the research site for this study. Lastly, I report on my ethical considerations, data collection methods, approaches to data management and analysis, and reflexivity in undertaking this study.

Next, the four findings and discussion chapters of this thesis are proffered. In Chapter Four, I examine the purposes of the viva. I conceptualise and compare how the examiners perceived the viva and its purposes. I then discuss the common underlying purposes that the examiners aimed to achieve in the PhD viva in relation to the university's assessment policy.

In Chapter Five, I identify the examiners' expectations of candidates' performance in the viva. I analyse the narratives of the examiners, to isolate the criteria on which they based their assessment decisions and reveal what they perceived as a good or bad viva performance.

In Chapter Six, I explore how the examiners learned to examine in the viva. I focus on their learning experiences and the challenges they encountered while participating in the viva as an examiner and end the chapter with a call for greater support. In Chapter Seven, I reflect on the findings and discuss ways to develop the expertise of examiners. I propose a framework to support examiners and their practices that comprises workshops, peer review and accreditation initiatives.

I conclude the study in Chapter Eight by providing a summary of the three themes and discussing the implications of the findings for practice. I argue the need to understand examiner practices and experiences in the PhD viva in Malaysia. As a consequence, the lessons learnt from the examiners could inform examiner practices and preparation. Examiners, especially novices will also be able to develop effective examining practices for the advancement of the doctoral assessment. The chapter ends with my reflections on the limitations of the study and some suggestions for further research.

## **Chapter Two: Background and Review of Literature**

This study builds on and contributes to work in the field of doctoral education, especially in the Malaysian context. As a rationale for exploring examiners' practices and experiences of the PhD viva, in Chapter One I argued that despite the common use of the PhD viva in the doctoral assessment, the practices of examiners in Malaysian universities are not yet understood. Although many studies have been conducted on the assessment practices of examiners internationally, there is a lack of research on the practices and experiences of examiners in the PhD viva specifically. This study provides additional insights into this topic.

In this chapter, I review the background and framing of the study, as well as previous research. I first situate the study by discussing the PhD assessment within the Malaysian higher education context and scrutinise what the PhD viva is, its uses and practices and the key issues that relate to it. I then elaborate on why the PhD viva and examiners' practices may be considered problematic by investigating what is already known of examiner practices in the PhD viva and problematising the tensions that exist around the unknown, to make a case for this study. Lastly, I consider the challenges and opportunities for research to identify a best possible way to conduct an inquiry in this area. Ultimately, I seek to advance an understanding of the PhD viva and its examiners, particularly their practices and experiences of the PhD viva.

This chapter is guided by four overarching review questions:

2.1 Why examine the PhD assessment in the Malaysian higher education context?

2.2 Why it is crucial to gain insights into the PhD viva?

2.3 Why focus on examiners' practices in the viva and their experiences?

2.4 What are the challenges and opportunities for research into the PhD viva and examiner practices and experiences?

Each of the questions is discussed in the next section.

## **2.1 Examining the PhD Assessment in the Malaysian Context**

This section begins with the first review question: *Why examine the PhD assessment in the Malaysian higher education context?* I posit that the PhD assessment warrants investigation because of the recognised prestige of the PhD worldwide, the rising demand and offer of the PhD in Malaysia and internationally, and the diversity of the PhD assessment. Before proceeding to examine the assessment within the Malaysian doctoral education context, it is necessary to review the PhD, the object of the assessment.

### **2.1.1 The recognised prestige of the PhD**

The PhD remains the most prestigious research degree worldwide and carries with it an air of respectability. It is one of the highest qualifications offered by universities in many countries, including Malaysia, and is awarded in many fields, such as the social sciences, sciences, and medicines. Candidates who embark on their doctoral journey, often with scholarships, as either full-time or part-time students, are guided by supervisors with

expertise in the relevant research field. Successful production and defence of the thesis will enable the candidates to obtain the degree. The completion of the degree is a recognition of the achievement in or ability to conduct research (Park, 2005). It is also a ‘qualification which permits a scholar to become a full participating member of a guild’ (Buchanan & Hérubel, 1995, p. 2). In other words, a PhD holder can find employment as a lecturer or researcher in a university.

This prestige also stems from the recognised value of the PhD in the knowledge-based economy. Once considered a teaching degree, the PhD is now recognised as a research degree with a focus on advancing knowledge through original research (Golde & Walker, 2006; Nerad & Evans, 2014). Following the Humboldt educational reforms in Germany, research was introduced at Berlin University in 1810 and promoted as ‘a search for a form of universal truth that set [universities] apart from society’ (Scott, Brown, Lunt & Thorne, 2004, p. 14). Candidates who pursued a PhD at that time were required to produce a written thesis that showed originality in research (Park, 2007); they were expected to push the boundaries of knowledge through research. This research component was later adopted into the PhD by other universities; for example, candidates are required to submit a thesis for examination that contributes to the relevant body of knowledge as part of the PhD requirement in US universities (Buchanan & Herubel, 1995), UK universities (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000) and Australian universities (Nelson, 1993). Thus, PhD holders are acknowledged as one of the key players in the creation of knowledge-based economic growth (Auriol, 2010).

Given the importance of the PhD in training researchers to contribute to the knowledge economy and the fact that PhD training offers transferable skills and competencies, the quality of doctoral education needs to be maintained at a high level and constantly enhanced. Universities play a key role in assuring the quality of the doctoral degrees they offer. Therefore, the different processes of doctoral education should be researched, including the doctoral assessment. Before universities can strive for accountability and enhance the quality of doctoral education, there is a need for increased transparency around the assessment of the PhD. It is with this issue that the current study is concerned.

### **2.1.2 The rising demand of the PhD in Malaysia**

Malaysian higher education is undergoing massification and now ranks third among ASEAN countries in student enrolment in Masters and PhD programs (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). In view of this rising demand for the PhD, 27 local universities now offer a PhD program. In line with the National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020, Malaysia needs to produce human capital that is knowledgeable, skilful and has a superior personality to face the developmental challenges in a knowledge- and innovation-based economy (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Therefore, the Ministry of Education, through its National Higher Education Strategic Plan 2020, devised an initiative to increase the number of PhDs in, and from, Malaysia. Several plans have been carried out by the government, including providing scholarships for postgraduate studies through a program called MyBrain15 (Ministry of Higher Education, n.d.). The program offers scholarships for Malaysians to pursue their studies at Masters and Doctoral levels.

Another plan around increasing the number of PhDs was to attract international students to study in Malaysia. Efforts by the government to achieve this included internationalising the degree, providing scholarships and allowing students to stay and work in Malaysia (Badaruddin, 2010). These efforts have resulted in a substantial increase in the number of students studying a PhD in Malaysia, from 22,594 in 2011 to 25,040 in 2012 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013). Students come from all over the world, from countries such as Iran, China and Indonesia (Aziz & Abdullah, 2014). The influx of international students is due to the lower cost of studying and living in Malaysia compared to the UK and other European countries.

With the increase in the number of students studying in Malaysia, universities are under pressure to uphold the quality of doctoral education and the PhD. Universities are key repositories of the new knowledge and human capital that contribute to the national knowledge economy (Brennan, King & Lebeau, 2004). They are responsible for providing high-quality programs, a learning environment for students, supervisors with expertise and learning support workshops for students. When it comes to doctoral assessment, universities employ external validation, such as inviting international examiners to ensure the candidates' work is up to doctoral standards (Kiley, 2009). The universities aim to achieve recognition that their qualifications are on par with those of other international universities.

To support the Malaysian universities' effort to ensure the quality of the doctoral education they offer, there is a need to gain insights into doctoral education in Malaysia. The assessment of the PhD must be scrutinised given its important role in doctoral education. While most published studies have focused on the PhD assessment in western context, such

as the UK, the US, Australia, New Zealand and Scandinavian countries (e.g. Bourke & Holbrook, 2013; Kelly, 2010; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000), doctoral education and assessment in Malaysia are underresearched.

The nature of examiner practice in Malaysia in doctoral assessment and the PhD viva is currently largely unknown due to a lack of research. It is important to understand what the assessment situation in Malaysia looks like. Moreover, universities need to monitor the practices of examiners, to determine whether they should be continuously appointed to examine the thesis and participate in the viva. Therefore, to develop sustainable examining practice, there is a need for quality assurance of the doctoral assessment and examiner practices.

### **2.1.3 Main issue of the PhD assessment**

In many universities, the PhD is awarded based on the final assessment. While a typical assessment usually involves the written thesis examination and the viva, it is not always conducted in the same way, with variations between both universities within a country and from one country to another (Hartley, 2000). There are three potential differences: the assessment tasks, the composition of the examination committee and the assessment criteria used.

First, not all universities employ both doctoral examination tasks; that is, they use a written thesis examination with or without the viva. A written thesis produced by a candidate is sent for examination. Examiners are expected to judge the quality of the thesis and produce an examiner report independently. In some universities, for example in Australia, the

doctoral assessment outcome is based solely on the written thesis examination (Bourke & Holbrook, 2013), and a viva is rarely needed. However, in most universities, the assessment is not complete without a viva. The viva is commonly employed in universities in the UK, US, New Zealand and Malaysia. For example, in the UK, a final outcome of the assessment can only be given after the viva (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000).

Also, there is a significant difference between universities in the composition of the examination committee; that is, whether internal and/or external examiners are employed for the assessment. Universities usually appoint internal examiners within the university, but some appoint external examiners from abroad. In the UK, Canada, New Zealand and most European and Scandinavian countries, examiner panels are usually mixed—that is, examiners are appointed from within the university as well as from abroad—and comprise two to seven examiners (Chen, 2011, Kyvik, 2014; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). In Australia, the examiners are mostly external to the university (Kiley, 2009a). It is expected that the external examiners can judge the quality of the thesis as well as provide developmental experience to the candidates (Joyner, 2003). In the US, however, the examination committee is often comprised of the candidate's dissertation committee (Kyvik, 2014), and the examination is done in-house (Kiley, 2009a).

In addition to these differences in the assessment tasks and composition of the examination committee, there are variations in the assessment criteria and practices used in conducting the assessment. Some universities provide explicit assessment criteria, but some do not. When the criteria are given, they tend to be obscure. Golding, Sharmini and Lazarovitch (2014) assert that the university criteria and instructions are 'inadequate',

‘vague’ and ‘often ignored by examiners’ (p. 564). This means that the assessment guidelines often do not have sufficient criteria defining what a quality thesis is and do not explain what counts as a contribution. Hence, the examiners often rely upon themselves in making judgements.

Further, there are variations in assessment practices. In a well-known study by Mullins and Kiley (2002) on thesis examination, 30 experienced examiners were interviewed about how they mark a thesis. One important finding was that the experienced examiners did not always rely on institutional guidelines but rather used their judgements in marking. In a follow-up study, the same authors found that inexperienced examiners, on the other hand, often referred to the institutional guidelines when assessing a thesis (Mullins & Kiley, 2002). Nevertheless, inexperienced examiners faced difficulties in judging whether a thesis was good or poor due to their lack of experience, as well as the lack of details of a quality thesis in the guidelines (Golding, Sharmini & Lazarovitch, 2014). They could only draw on their personal experience in judging the quality of the thesis. In view of the potential issues for assessment resulting from different assessment practices, it is crucial to understand these practices in order to ensure quality in the assessment.

While the PhD is offered worldwide, how it is assessed varies significantly between universities, including in terms of the assessment tasks, the composition of the examination committee and the assessment criteria and practices used in conducting the assessment. This diversity is unavoidable given the different university policies and practices in higher education; however, it must be better understood. The situation of the doctoral assessment in Malaysia is not well known due to the lack of studies; evidence is needed. The evidence

will provide insight into an Asian context, adding to the literature on doctoral practices worldwide (Powell & Green, 2007).

## **2.2 Scrutinising the PhD Viva**

This section addresses the second review question: *Why it is crucial to examine the PhD viva?* I argue that it is important to examine the viva because of its widespread use in the PhD assessment, because of the different institutional and viva practices that exist, and because of the confusion these differences might bring to examiners. I start with the history of the viva and discuss the various definitions associated with it. Next, I demonstrate the diversity of viva policies and practices with examples from different parts of the world. Then, I discuss the purposes of the viva, and highlight some potential problems that might occur for examiners.

### **2.2.1 The history of the PhD viva**

The origin of the PhD viva can be traced back as early as the twelfth century, during which time the viva provided an opportunity for a PhD candidate to display knowledge orally to obtain the PhD. Lim (1995) claims that it was a disputation intended to hone one's dialectical skills. Further, it was 'an innately conservative process, wherein questioning was conducted as a form of training within an accepted intellectual framework' (Cobban, 1988, p. 171, in Crossouard, 2011). During this early period, the viva was a prerequisite to become a qualified university teacher.

In the nineteenth century, the viva was introduced in its modern form into doctoral assessment policy as one of the requirements for obtaining a PhD. It was first documented

in doctoral assessment policy in the US, and later in the UK. In 1860, PhD candidates at Yale University had to participate in an ‘oral examination in defence of [their] dissertation and subject specialization’ (Buchanan & Herubel, 1995, p. 3) along with other requirements, including that they take ‘specialised courses and residency of at least one year, including at least three years of doctoral enrolment’; fulfil a ‘language requirement demonstrating reading knowledge of one or two foreign languages’; and attend ‘qualifying or comprehensive examination; and submitting a dissertation’ (Buchanan & Herubel, 1995, p. 3) before being awarded a PhD. In 1917, PhD candidates at Oxford University in the UK were required to participate in a viva after the submission of a written thesis for examination. Since then, many UK universities have included the viva as a requirement in their doctoral assessment policies for obtaining the PhD degree (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000) as have many universities worldwide.

### **2.2.2 Definitions of the PhD viva and its associated university practices**

The term *viva* comes from the Latin *viva voce*, which simply means ‘the living voice’ (Baldacchino, 1995). Over the years, different terms have been used to refer to the viva. Three dominantly used terms in the literature are the *PhD viva*, *doctoral oral examination* and *dissertation defence*. These terms are used in different geographical areas, and often connote similarities while implying different practices.

First, the term *PhD viva* signifies an oral examination that involves a pass or fail (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). Examiners who participate in the doctoral assessment will first read the thesis submitted by the candidate, and then discuss it with the candidate in an oral examination. The candidate is expected to defend the thesis in the viva to pass the assessment

(Trafford & Leshlem, 2008). Because the decision of a pass or fail can only be confirmed after the viva (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004), the viva is therefore regarded as the final doctoral assessment in the UK context.

Other terms used interchangeably by researchers to refer to the PhD viva, often with the same definition, are the *doctoral viva* (Trafford & Leshlem, 2002, 2008; Trafford, 2003; Park, 2003), *viva* (Carter & Whittaker, 2009; Hartley, 2000; Murray, 2003; Tinkler & Jackson, 2001; Wallace, 2003; Wellington, 2010), *doctoral viva voce* (Crossouard, 2011) and *PhD examination* (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). Despite the variation of terms, the term *PhD viva* is widely recognised in UK universities, and it is also used by the other universities that adopt a British doctoral examination format, such as in Malaysia, the site for this study.

Another term used is *doctoral oral examination*. This term is commonly used in the New Zealand context (Carter, 2008; Kelly, 2010; Rowarth & Fraser, 2006) and has a definition similar to *PhD viva*. It is typically ‘a dialogue between the student and the examiners, with questions being asked, responded to and discussed by all participants’ (Cooksey & McDonald, 2011, p. 579). An oral examination is compulsorily used as part of the doctoral assessment in all the eight universities in New Zealand. It involves questions and answers in private, but the institutional viva practices vary. For example, in the University of Auckland<sup>2</sup>, a candidate can only be allowed to proceed to the oral examination once the written thesis has been passed. This practice is different from the British PhD viva, in which a candidate participates in the viva after the submission of the thesis regardless of

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<sup>2</sup> University of Auckland, PhD guidelines- Doctoral oral examination (page 17)-  
<https://cdn.auckland.ac.nz/assets/central/about/the-university/how-the-university-works/policy-and-administration/Learning%20and%20Teaching/2016%20Statute%20website%20version.pdf>

the initial written thesis examination result, and a pass or fail in the doctoral assessment can only be deliberated after the viva (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000).

*A dissertation defence* is the third frequently used term to refer to the PhD viva. This term implies that a candidate would normally defend his/her thesis in public (Recski, 2005). This defence is different from the PhD viva, which is usually conducted behind closed doors and held in front of a panel of examiners (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). The dissertation defence provides ‘an opportunity for an important academic conversation that operates to certify the candidate’s membership in his or her chosen specialization’ (Swales, 2004, p. 169). It is widely used in contexts such as the US, Canada, Iran, Sweden and Norway. Other terms are also used in the US and Canada, such as PhD defence (Swales, 2004), doctoral dissertation oral examination (Arnkoff, Glass & Robinson, 1992) and doctoral/PhD dissertation defence (Chen, 2008, 2011).

From these studies, it is evident that the different terms and definitions of the PhD viva are likely to result in different university viva practices. Understanding the term used by a university may help in making sense of the viva practices within that university. In the current study, I use the term ‘PhD viva’ to refer to the oral examination that is used in the doctoral assessment in the Malaysian context. This oral examination has three features:

- It is a mandatory doctoral oral examination in universities in Malaysia. The candidate participates in the viva after their thesis has been examined. After the viva, the examiners make a final decision on the doctoral assessment.

- It is a closed-door event. Only invited members are allowed to be there and know what happens in the viva.
- A re-viva is an option and a pass or fail given in the viva will affect the assessment outcome. A candidate's performance is evaluated.

### **2.2.3 The key issues about the PhD viva**

The viva is a matter of some contention in doctoral education. Because the conduct of the viva is closed-door and often shrouded in mystery, Burnham (1994) once described the viva as 'one of the best kept secrets in higher education' (p. 14). Only invited members know what happens in the viva (Trafford, 2003), which restricts the public's access to information about the exam. However, not all institutions or countries adopt a closed-door viva format. Members who are new to the conduct of the private viva face issues in practice due to this opaqueness. These issues include the varied practices around students' access to examiner reports before the viva, the role of the supervisor as examiner in the viva and their authority to speak, the conduct of the viva, and the decision-making criteria (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). All these issues have raised concerns about quality in the doctoral assessment. In fact, Morley, Leonard and David (2002) questioned whether the 'doctoral assessment has escaped the regulation of quality assurance procedures' (p. 263).

Concerns around the quality of the PhD viva have grown due to recent developments in doctoral education. In a recent article in *Times Higher Education*, Gibney (2013) wrote 'the viva, the final hurdle to gaining a PhD, is labour intensive, not conducted to any national standard and is dreaded by students who fear an examiner will capriciously halt their career.'

Is it still fit for purpose?’ (p. 34). In another article in the same publication, Bassnett (2014) remarked that the ‘cavalier attitudes [of a university] lead to uncivil practices in the conduct of vivas’ (p. 31). These articles reflect the unresolved issues on the purpose and practice of the viva in particular, which warrant further analysis. These views have also been espoused by prominent higher education researchers (Kvyik, 2014; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000).

In view of the many issues surrounding doctoral assessment, researchers from different geographical contexts have started to review the PhD viva practices in their countries (Kvyik, 2014; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). Kvyik (2014), in a recent study on doctoral assessment, invited researchers and practitioners to consider the alternative of standardising the different assessment procedures, including the doctoral viva. Kvyik surveyed a number of examiners and compared the PhD assessment systems of four countries: the UK, the US, Sweden and Norway. He found great differences in examination and viva practices. He then suggested the need for ‘best practice’ in assessment practices due to the trend towards internationalisation in doctoral education.

Kvyik’s suggestion to look for best practice in doctoral assessment is thought-provoking and essential. The first step should be to identify the variations in viva practices in different geographical contexts. Having an overview of the viva policies and practices in certain locations could offer insights into contemporary practices in doctoral assessment and generate ideas for research and how to better maintain the standard of doctoral education. Thus, this study is an attempt to identify the policies and practices relating to the PhD viva within the Malaysian context, with a focus on the experiences of examiners.

Among the issues raised about the PhD viva, three in particular have received significant attention. These are *the varied conduct of the PhD viva in universities*, *the purpose of the viva* and *student preparations for the viva*. In addition, recent research attention has been given *on the impact of the viva in doctoral assessment*. Each of these issues will be discussed in the following sections.

### **2.2.3.1 The variant conduct of the PhD viva in universities**

The conduct of the PhD viva, which is shaped by each respective university's policies, differs between contexts. Even within the same country, the conduct of the PhD viva may be diverse (Hartley, 2000; Powell & Green, 2007). However, one common principle applies to the viva; it has a legitimate status in doctoral assessment in almost all universities worldwide, from Africa to Australia. Despite the viva not being obligatory in Australia (Kiley, 2009a), it is still evident in many universities' doctoral assessment policies, and it is used to deal with problematic cases when consensus cannot be reached on the assessment outcome.

Three types of viva exist. The viva may be conducted as a compulsory oral examination, a hybrid examination and ritual event, or as a strictly ritualistic event. The first type of viva is a compulsory oral examination. This is the type commonly adopted in the UK, New Zealand and Asia, including Malaysia, the context of the present study. For this type of viva, the main purpose is to judge whether a PhD candidate possesses the ability to conduct doctoral-level research. The decision will normally be based on the candidate's written work and oral performance. The outcome of the viva could be a pass or fail, and a re-viva might be an option in certain universities (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004).

As an oral examination, the viva is usually conducted in private and involves a question and answer session. In the University of Oxford<sup>3</sup>, UK, for example, the viva adopts a closed-door format in which only invited members—the convenor, examiners, PhD candidate and supervisors—are allowed to be in the room. Supervisors are invited as silent observers only and are not generally allowed to contribute to the decision-making in the viva. The candidates and the examiners are expected to put on their academic regalia for the viva, which signifies its formality. A final decision of pass or fail in the doctoral assessment can only be made after the viva has been held (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). Thus, the viva is assessment-oriented.

The second type of viva is a hybrid event, conducted as both an examination and a ritual. The oral defence often practised in US universities is this kind of viva. The format of the oral defence is public. A candidate is expected to defend the thesis orally as a *rite of passage* in the presence of a public audience and examination committee. For example, in McGill University<sup>4</sup>, Canada, a PhD candidate will only proceed to the oral defence when the examiners have judged the written thesis as passable. The candidate is expected to give a presentation and answer questions from the public and the examination committee. The examination committee comprises five to seven members: the chair, supervisors, internal and external examiners, and an external member from the university. After the public defence session, the examination committee considers the result of the written thesis examination and the candidate's oral performance before making a final recommendation in

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<sup>3</sup> PhD viva regulations, University of Oxford- <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/exams/research?wssl=1>

<sup>4</sup> Doctoral oral defence guidelines, McGill University- <https://www.mcgill.ca/gps/thesis/guidelines/oral-defence>

private. A candidate may be failed and asked to sit for a re-viva because of poor oral performance, but this rarely happens (Chen, 2011, 2014).

The third type of viva is a ritualistic event. This type of viva does not function as an oral examination because the thesis has already been assessed and passed. In some Scandinavian countries, the viva is viewed strongly as a ritual of closure to one's doctoral journey. It 'has the character of a ceremonial public academic debate' (Swales, 2004, p. 147). For instance, in Stockholm University, Sweden, a PhD thesis produced by a PhD candidate must first be evaluated and accepted by the department before proceeding to the public defence. A PhD candidate is expected to publish the whole thesis on an open access platform before the defence. On the day of the defence, the examiner (opponent) will present a critical summary of the candidate's work, followed by questions and answers from the examination committee and the public (Maria Kuteva and Spela Mezek, personal communication, 24 September 2014). A candidate is not likely to fail the defence in this ritualistic viva, as the thesis has already been peer reviewed and published.

Taking these three types of viva together with the examples presented earlier, it is evident that, despite the viva being employed in the assessment for the award of a globally recognised doctorate, it is conducted in significantly different ways across both universities and countries. Table 1 summarises the possible differences in the PhD viva as detailed above.

**Table 1.** Differences in the conduct of the PhD viva

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a. Types	oral examination, hybrid of oral examination and ritual, and ritual
b. Format	private or public
c. Examination committee	two to seven members
d. Procedure	presentation and question and answer, question and answer
e. Formality	academic regalia or formal dress code
f. Outcome	re-viva, pass or fail

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Given the variations in how the viva can be conducted in doctoral education contexts, it is crucial to clarify the nature of the viva in the current study. The viva under investigation is assessment-oriented and private. It involves three examiners and adopts a presentation and question and answer format. The viva is essential in the doctoral assessment; an assessment outcome cannot be finalised without the viva. This is similar to how the viva is conducted in the UK.

Clarifying how the viva is conducted in Malaysia also contributes to understanding the conduct of the PhD viva in Asian universities. Most of the literature on the PhD viva has focused on the western context (Kvyik, 2014; Powell & Green, 2007), with the Asian context remaining poorly studied and understood. This is particularly problematic given the rise of postgraduates pursuing doctorates in Asian universities, and the globalisation of doctoral education.

### **2.2.3.2 The different purposes of the viva**

The variations in the policies and practices of the PhD can make the purpose of the viva unclear. However, most researchers tend to agree that the viva serves the purpose of examination (Carter, 2008; Kelly, 2010; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). In a prominent study conducted by Tinkler and Jackson (2004) in the UK, the researchers argued that a doctoral viva has three broad purposes: examination, development and ritual, of which the main purpose is examination. In the viva, examiners act as gatekeepers by carrying out a series of evaluation tasks to ensure that the candidate possesses the qualities to be ‘a credible member of the academic community’ (Rowarth & Fraser, 2006, p. 209) and to receive the highest award, a PhD from the university. Examiners, as reported by Tinkler and Jackson (2004), usually examine for:

- the authentication of the candidate’s thesis;
- the candidate’s ability to locate PhD research in the broader context;
- the candidate’s understanding and ability to produce and present research to PhD standard;
- the candidate’s ability to defend the thesis;
- the final decision of borderline cases;
- clarification of obscurities and areas of weakness;
- the candidate’s oral skills;
- the qualities to be accepted to the academic community (gatekeeping).

These purposes have also been examined and reconfirmed by researchers in the New Zealand context. Carter (2008) conducted a focus group discussion with academics and reported that the purpose of a viva is an examination. Similarly, Kelly (2010) carried out a survey with PhD candidates and found that they perceived the purposes of the PhD viva to include the clarification and authentication of the thesis, and a test of wider knowledge of the field; that is, an examination.

A second purpose of the PhD viva is related to the opportunity for development. As examiners critically examine the candidate's written thesis, they often provide two types of developmental feedback: basic and advanced (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). For basic development, examiners provide feedback for the candidate to improve the quality of the thesis if the thesis is not at a PhD standard. If the standard of the thesis is at PhD level, the examiners will provide advice about future publishing and career. However, examiners do not always provide basic and advanced developmental feedback at the same time. This usually depends on the quality of the thesis (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004).

A third purpose of the PhD viva is a ceremony or ritual to mark the end of the doctoral journey. Dunleavy (2003) highlights that 'life-changing events need to be marked by a rite of passage, and so it is with the doctorate where it is traditional for the final examination to be an oral one' (p. 217). In other words, a PhD viva is a ritualistic event for a candidate who has spent several years working on a PhD. This is certainly the case in Sweden. However, in the UK, the PhD viva is focused on assessment, with the ritualistic aspect only regarded as one of the viva's purposes (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004).

Even though the three broad purposes of the viva—examination, development and ritual—have been identified, a viva is not likely to achieve all three purposes. The purpose of the viva is, however, decided by the quality of the written thesis, as argued by Tinkler and Jackson (2004). Tinkler and Jackson (2004) illustrate that when the quality of the thesis is good, the purpose of the viva is for authentication, idea development and advice on publication. When the quality of the thesis is poor and indicates failure, the viva is used to confirm the result as a fail. When the quality of the thesis is borderline, a viva helps the examiners to decide whether the thesis could be improved to meet the standards of a PhD.

The current study follows the argument of Tinkler and Jackson (2004) that the viva serves mainly as an examination, even though it may also serve developmental and celebratory purposes. This raised the question of whether this purpose applies for universities in other geographical areas such as Malaysia and whether examiners share a common practice.

### **2.2.3.3 Student preparations for the viva**

How students can prepare to take the viva is another rich area for research. Because of the lack of transparency around the conduct of the viva, it is useful to gather information directly from students. Hartly and Jory (2000) conducted a survey on the experiences of 100 UK psychology postgraduates. They reported that students' reactions to their PhD viva experience were mixed almost equally (44% positive and 39% negative). In another study on the experiences of students who had been through the viva, Wallace and Marsh (2001) concluded from the viewpoints of the students that the viva was perceived as 'an ordeal'. This finding resonates with another of Wallace's studies (Wallace, 2003), in which he

interviewed six PhD candidates and reported that even though all six of the students passed the viva, four of them had experienced the viva negatively, describing their experiences as an ordeal, a humiliation, a trial and an interrogation. Thus, while student experiences of the PhD viva do tend to be mixed, a negative view of the viva does seem to be most common.

To better prepare students for the viva, several strategies have been suggested. Studies have proposed counselling workshops (Arnkoff, Glass & Robinson, 1992), and training in the skills and content components of the viva (Tinkler & Jackson, 2002). Arnkoff, Glass and Robinson (1992) examined the relationship between the anxiety, thoughts, self-efficacy and performance of 37 students while defending their theses. Using a quantitative research design, they found that students' thoughts (positive or positive and negative) affected their anxiety level. This finding was useful and has implications for counselling workshops on preparing for the viva. On a similar note, Tinkler and Jackson's (2002) study identified the skills and content components as the key components of the PhD viva for which doctoral candidates could prepare. This includes being able to communicate clearly, defend themselves in the viva, and seek guidance from supervisors.

Other preparation strategies include demystifying the viva through student questions (Murray, 2003), mock vivas, a simulation of the real viva (Hartley & Fox, 2004) and changing student conceptions (Wellington, 2010). Murray (2003) analysed the questions asked by students about the viva by collecting questions from several workshops that aimed to prepare students for the viva. Most of the students when asked were concerned with issues such as examiner questions and their incapability to answer them. This led Murray to argue

that students needed a clearer and more informed understanding of the examination and better preparation for the viva.

Hartley and Fox's (2004) survey of the mock viva experiences of 29 UK postgraduates supports the need for student preparation. They reported that there were great differences in the conduct of mock vivas, and disparities in the questions asked in the mock and actual viva. However, the major conclusion drawn from the student survey responses was that the mock viva was useful to prepare candidates for the actual viva. In another study, Wellington (2010) explored students' pre-conceptions about the viva. He conducted 16 focus group interviews with postgraduates at a UK university during 2002–2009 and found that they had both positive and negative pre-conceptions about the viva. He then argued that students should be prepared for the viva, and that students' pre-conceptions could be a pedagogical guide for that preparation.

#### **2.2.3.4 Impact of the PhD viva in doctoral assessment**

A recent research focus of the viva is on its impact in the doctoral assessment. In a large-scale cross-national study, Lovat et al. (2015) investigate the doctoral assessment in three countries, Australia, United Kingdom and New Zealand. The researchers first examined the doctoral assessment in Australia which does not include a viva component and then compared the findings with the other two countries, UK and NZ. Both the countries typically include a viva as part of their doctoral assessments. In their study, the researchers attempt to find out if the viva makes a difference in the doctoral assessment. They conducted a total of 82 interviews with examiners who have experienced the PhD examination with or without the viva, as well as with both the models. The main findings from their study are

that they found no significant influence of the viva in the doctoral assessments in both the countries in comparison, the viva is mostly used for closure and clarification purpose, and the inclusion of a viva would not make any difference in doctoral assessment in Australia, except for a greater closing ritual. In view of the findings, further research may be needed to focus on the ritualistic aspect of the viva.

This section has reviewed the background to the PhD viva and identified some of the key issues around it to establish the importance of further research on this important examination. Most prior research on the PhD viva has focused on the purpose of the viva and the issues surrounding student preparations for it, with a recent focus on the impact of the viva. There seems to be a lack of attention on examiners, particularly on their practices and preparations for the viva.

### **2.3 Investigating Examiner Practices and Experiences**

This section addresses the third review question: *Why focus on examiner practices in the viva and their experiences?* The reason is quite simple: examiners play a central role in the viva, and yet their practices are poorly understood. To further explain this research need, I first provide the background by examining the role of doctoral examiners in PhD assessment, how they are selected, who takes part in the viva, and what is known about their practices in the viva.

### **2.3.1 Examiners as gatekeepers**

Examiners play an important role as gatekeepers in the PhD assessment. They advise the university whether a candidate has passed the assessment after completing two tasks: assessing the written thesis and participating in the oral examination. The aim for examiners who participate in the doctoral assessment is to give assurance to the institutions that a candidate has done doctoral-quality work that is worthy of a doctorate. However, not all examiners participate in the viva. In many institutions, external examiners from overseas examine the written thesis and produce an independent report, which is where their examining role ends. They could, but do not always, participate in the viva due to practical reasons such as distance (Kiley, 2009a).

The selection criteria of examiners vary across universities. Generally, examiners are nominated by supervisors with suggestions given by the students and approved by the Graduate School. They may be internal or external to the university. Some universities employ only external examiners for doctoral assessment, for example, in some of the Australian universities (Kiley, 2009a). However, many universities, such as the University of Otago, New Zealand, employ a mix of both internal and external examiners. Internal examiners are appointed from among the academics of a department or university, and the external examiners will be academics from within the country or abroad.

Those examiners that are selected should ideally fulfil a number of professional and personality-related requirements (Kiley, 2009b). Professionally, examiners should possess a sound knowledge of the research topic and methodology, be familiar with the doctoral policy of the university that offers the degree, have examined at a university, have experience

examining a doctorate, and be ready to examine when approached. In terms of personality, examiners should be fair in their assessment, assess the submitted written thesis and not impose how it should be written. Examiners must also be reliable in the sense that they can meet the examination deadline by submitting their examiner reports on time. These requirements as argued by Kiley (2009b) are often difficult to fulfil in practice, especially when an inexperienced supervisor is trying to select an ideal examiner. Examiners are employed to assure the standards of the assessment because they are independent to the supervisory committee.

Like the selection criteria, the appointment of examiners varies across countries. In the UK, two examiners are normally appointed; one internal to the university and one external to the university. An example of where this occurs is the University of Cambridge. In New Zealand, three examiners are appointed. One internal examiner from within the university, and two external examiners (one from New Zealand and one international). In Germany, the supervisor of the thesis is also an examiner (Kehm, 2008). In Malaysia, three examiners are nominated: two internal and one international. These examples show the variations in the appointment of examiners in different universities.

However they are selected and appointed, examiners play a powerful role in doctoral assessment. They are influential in the examination of the written thesis and the viva. Examiners first form a judgment based on the written thesis examination and prepare their examiner reports independently. They may then participate in a viva to confirm or alter their initial outcome of assessment. The decision made by examiners in the doctoral assessment

affects the candidate; however, examiners, are confronted with challenges in doctoral assessment due to the:

- different types of doctoral programs (traditional, professional, thesis by publication and new route publications) (Park, 2007)
  - The different programs have disparate assessment standards and requirements at the institution and national level.
  
- growing phenomenon of interdisciplinary research
  - Doctoral examiners may be asked to examine an interdisciplinary doctoral study which is not totally from their disciplines. Since a study could be completed drawing on theories and methodologies from several disciplines, judging the merit of such a study may be challenging for some examiners.
  
- the variety of assessment practice
  - Doctoral examiners may be appointed from different parts of the world, and they may have dissimilar assessment practices. For example, assessing a doctoral thesis from a Canadian university may have to consider the coursework a student has completed and the dissertation defence before making a recommendation of the final assessment outcome.

In brief, the evolution of doctoral programs, the infinite possibility of interdisciplinary research, and the different assessment practices between institutions and countries may be pushing the boundaries of doctoral examiners' capabilities or posing

potential examining challenges to examiners. As such, helping examiners to become more competent in ensuring the quality of their practice is deemed crucial.

### **2.3.2 Examiner practices and experiences in the thesis assessment**

Given the significant role of examiners, it is essential to find out how examiners examine in the doctoral assessment. Examiner experiences in the written thesis assessment have attracted the most extensive research coverage in the field of doctoral assessment research. These studies have focused on how experienced examiners examine theses (Mullins & Kiley, 2002), how inexperienced examiners examine theses (Kiley & Mullins, 2004), how examiners examine practice-based theses (Winter, Griffiths & Green, 2000), the quality of PhD theses (Bourke, 2008; Bourke, Holbrook & Lovat, 2005), the criteria used by examiners in examiner reports (Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat & Dally, 2004; Johnston, 1997), examiner comments on the literature review (Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn & Lovat, 2007), examiner recommendations on PhD theses (Bourke, Hattie & Anderson, 2004) and quality in doctoral assessment (Lovat, Holbrook & Bourke, 2008).

Recent studies have also examined examiner practices from other directions such as from a cultural perspective (Wisker & Robinson, 2014), in terms of the consistency of examiner assessment practices (Bourke & Holbrook, 2013), a synthesis study of examiner practices (Golding, Sharmini & Lazarovitch, 2013), assessment procedures for Norwegian PhD theses (Kyvik, 2014), examiner views of originality (Clarke & Lunt, 2014) and the assessment of publication-based theses (Sharmini et al., 2014). This growing list of publications shows that research on examiner experiences and practices is a hot topic and is driving the burgeoning field of doctoral assessment research.

Collectively, these studies provided some evidence of thesis assessment and show that examiners generally lacked objective standards when examining the thesis, as they usually draw on their experiences (Kiley & Mullins, 2004; Mullins & Kiley, 2002). However, a recent study, which reviewed 30 research articles on examiner practices in the thesis assessment, reported that these examiners tend to have similar assessment practices (Golding et al., 2014). Perhaps this is due to the examiner training on written thesis assessment that takes place at different institutions and also due to the availability of abundant research studies on written thesis examination, which have shaped their examination practices. However, because examiner practices in the written thesis examination are not the focus of the current study, an extensive review of this research is beyond the scope of this study and so is excluded from this section.

### **2.3.3 Examiner practices and experiences in the viva**

Compared to the number of studies on thesis examination, examiner practices in the viva have received much less research coverage. One main reason for this may be the restrictive access to the viva. Morley, Leonard and David (2002) pointed out that the PhD viva 'is seldom witnessed/observed by anyone not involved in the examination process, which poses challenges both for monitoring and for researching the assessment process' (pp. 268–269). This lack of access prohibits new examiners or candidates from equipping themselves with 'insider' knowledge of viva practice. However, some past studies have provided insight into the examining practices of examiners in the PhD viva. These include the viva focus and questions (Trafford, 2003; Trafford & Leshlem, 2002, 2008), examiner experiences (Carter, 2008), types of examiners (Partington, Brown & Gordon, 1993), and

learning to examine (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000, 2004; Pearce, 2005). These are now discussed in turn.

### **2.3.3.1 The PhD viva focus and questions**

The first research area is on the examiner questions and area of focus in the viva. Trafford (2003) examined the questions posed by examiners from 25 doctoral viva observations. He found that there is a dissimilar pattern of questioning from experienced and inexperienced examiners, and the examiner questions could be categorised into four quadrants, namely A (Thesis), B (Theoretical Perspectives), C (Practice of Research) and D (Doctorateness) (see Figure 2). He explained that inexperienced examiners tend to focus on issues in quadrants A, B and C, whereas experienced examiners tend to focus on issues in quadrant D. This led Trafford and Leshlem (2002) to argue that the questions in the viva are predictable. Their studies have provided a comprehensive insight into the types of questions examiners tend to ask in the viva, which are beneficial for viva preparation. However, whether examiners will really ask questions from the four quadrants are not known and required further study.

<p><b>Quadrant C</b></p> <p>Issues on research questions, choice of topics, and location of study</p>	<p><b>Quadrant D</b></p> <p>Defending doctorateness, contributing to knowledge, critique of research, conceptualising findings, developing the conceptual framework, synthesising concepts, and establishing links/concepts</p>
<p><b>Quadrant A</b></p> <p>Resolving research questions, content and structure of thesis</p>	<p><b>Quadrant B</b></p> <p>Research approach, paradigms, implications of research findings, awareness of wider literature, and familiarity with relevant literature</p>

**Figure 2.** Examiner focus in the viva (Trafford, 2003)

### 2.3.3.2 Assessment experiences of examiners

The second research area is on the participation experiences of examiners. Research on examiner experiences in the viva has focused mainly on the issues of the purposes and procedures of the viva. Trafford and Leshlem (2002) analysed the views from a viva team—comprising a convenor, examiners, candidate and supervisors—and included their own views in the discussion. They addressed several issues, such as pre-viva perceptions, strategies to display doctorateness, behavioural stages, post-viva thoughts, area of focus in the viva, and the notion of defence, to show how the decision was made by the examiners that was then influenced by the student in the viva. In another study, Carter (2008) conducted informal focus group research with 23 academics at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, on their experiences of assessing written theses and being a viva examiner. She

found that the examiners discussed the purpose of the viva as an oral examination and collegial chat, gave the typical length of the viva as two and a half hours, and described the scope/format of the viva as requiring the students to give an oral presentation of their work and respond to questions from examiners.

### **2.3.3.3 Types of examiners**

The third research area is on the types of examiners. Partington, Brown and Gordon (1993) described six types of bad viva examiner. An ‘inquisitor’ asks the student questions to impress until the student cannot answer. A ‘hobby horse rider’ keeps focusing on an issue and neglects the bigger picture. A ‘kite-flyer’ talks about something related to the topic but out of scope. A ‘reminiscer’ keeps sharing his/her own story in the doctoral viva. A ‘proof reader’ keeps raising grammar issues. A ‘committee person’ acts like a supervisor. While interesting, Partington, Brown and Gordon’s (1993) study lacks research rigour as it was not a research study but merely descriptions of examiners in a handbook, and therefore may not be representative of examiners and cannot be generalised. Further study on examining style is needed.

### **2.3.3.4 Learning to examine**

The fourth research area is on being a viva examiner. Based on the literature review, examiners may be able to learn to become a better viva examiner by referring to two how-to guidebooks published in the UK. Tinkler and Jackson’s (2004) handbook on examination for students and academics is based on their research, conducted during 1999–2003, which surveyed examiners from 20 UK universities on their experiences. The handbook is a useful resource for ground knowledge on the viva in the UK. Similarly, Pearce’s (2005) how-to

guidebook on examining a thesis offers some useful insights on being a viva examiner and some practical advice. The book is valuable for novice examiners in the UK due to its prescriptive nature. However, not all examiners have read or are aware of the existence of the two guidebooks, and there is no doubt that examiners could learn to examine in different ways and not just relying on the two books mentioned above.

Although some studies are evident on examiner practices and experiences in the viva, these studies are limited, and the subjects have not been studied in detail. The assessment practices of examiners remain generally unclear. The seminal works in this field, Tinkler and Jackson's (2000, 2004) studies, are useful to inform knowledge, but considering they are based on research conducted two decades ago, up-to-date research is thus needed to review the assessment practices of examiners and to support examiners who are new to the assessment.

## **2.4 Researching Examiners and the PhD Viva**

Finally, this section considers the review question: *What are the challenges and opportunities for research into the PhD viva and examiner practices and experiences?* I discuss the methodological challenges and urge for research into examiner practices and experiences in the PhD viva.

Researching PhD viva examiners is challenging, principally because of the lack of access to the viva (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000; Wallace, 2003). While some institutions, such as those in Sweden, have adopted an open-door viva policy, most countries and universities still adopt a closed-door approach. This means only participants who are involved in the viva

have access to it (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). Participants in the viva normally include the chair, examination committee and the candidate.

This closed-door policy makes data collection extremely difficult. The studies on the PhD viva to date are mainly based on the experiences and perceptions of students and academics (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004; Wallace, 2003), except one important study that focused on the viva questions asked by examiners (Trafford, 2003). Trafford (2003) collected this data while playing the role of chair in the viva. He was the participant, and he documented the questions asked by examiners at the end of the viva. He found that the examiner questions could be categorised according to disciplines. His data collection method has proven useful due to the 'insider' perspective it offers. However, questions that need to be asked are whether all chairpersons have an interest to research the PhD viva and whether Trafford's findings reflect current assessment practice worldwide, including in Malaysia. Follow-up studies on the closed-door viva are therefore needed but are lacking due to the difficulties in data collection.

Despite examiners being the gatekeepers of the doctoral assessment, their practices in the PhD viva are not well known. The unclear examiners' practices are problematic and deserve attention, in particular to monitor and improve on examiners' practices, and to support examiners to ensure best practice in the assessment. The lack of research insight into the PhD viva and examiners' practices makes implementing professional development for examiners in the viva difficult. Examiners need to be supported to enhance their assessment practices in the viva. For this, research is needed.

## **2.5 Summary**

This chapter reviewed the literature on doctoral education, the PhD viva and doctoral examiners to provide the context of the current study. It has argued that there is a significant need for further research into the viva and examiner practices. Much debate surrounds the PhD viva, especially about the lack of clarity in examiners' practices in the assessment. Understanding examiners' practices and experiences is crucial for ensuring the quality and success of the assessment process and outcome. It is this understanding that the current study aims to yield.

In the next chapter, I discuss the qualitative research methodology used in the study, a narrative approach to achieve the research aims and questions.

## Chapter Three: Qualitative Methodology

In Chapters One and Two, I have argued the need to research the PhD viva, particularly the assessment practices and experiences of examiners within the Malaysian doctoral education context, to shed light on the practices of examiners and the oral examination. In this chapter, I propose using a narrative approach grounded in the qualitative research tradition to investigate the following research questions. I justify the rationale for selecting this approach and describe the methodological decisions taken to address the research purposes and questions of the study.

**Primary research question:** What are the examination practices and experiences of examiners in the PhD viva within a Malaysian university?

*Sub-question 1:* What are examiners' conceptualisations of the purposes of the viva?

*Sub-question 2:* What are examiners' expectations of the candidates' oral performance in the viva?

*Sub-question 3:* How do examiners learn to examine in the viva?

*Sub-question 4:* What are some of the examination challenges encountered by the examiners?

**Secondary research question:** How can the knowledge gained from the examiners inform practice and training?

*Sub-question 5:* How should examiners and their practices in the PhD viva be supported by the university towards effective assessment?

This chapter is structured as follows. I first articulate my research position from a constructivist paradigm. Next, I discuss the use of narrative inquiry as the research approach for illuminating the assessment discourse of examiners. Then I describe the research site and its doctoral assessment, as well as the research ethics application process. Last, I explain the data collection procedures and elaborate on the data management and analysis procedures employed in this study. I assert that a narrative approach can capture the complexities of examiner practices of the PhD viva.

### **3.1 Positioning Myself in the Constructivist Paradigm**

In this study, I approached the examiners' narratives of experience in the PhD viva from a constructivist research paradigm. A paradigm is a set of philosophical assumptions researchers have of the world in perceiving reality, and the paradigm chosen will shape the types of research problems and questions researchers study (Cresswell, 2014). Constructivism is one of the central research paradigms in qualitative research. A constructivist paradigm assumes that a relativist ontology (many realities) and a subjectivist epistemology (co-creation of knowledge) are constructed in one's mind but not discovered in the world (Cresswell, 2014; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In other words, reality and knowledge are constructed in the researcher's mind.

I adopted a constructivist paradigm because my philosophical beliefs (ontological and epistemological views) are closely aligned with this paradigm. To me, ontology or reality is what I experience and make sense of. Ontology is 'an area of philosophy that deals with the nature of being, or what exists; the area of philosophy that asks what really is and what the fundamental categories of reality are' (Neuman, 2011, p. 92). Further, my

ontological view in this study was influenced by the vast differences in the experiences of the PhD viva revealed by the conversations I had with postgraduates. For instance, some PhD candidates from Malaysia that I met revealed that their viva experiences were unpleasant, and that they often felt intimidated in the vivas even though they have passed the assessment. They attributed this in large part to not being clear about the purpose of, and the practice in, the viva. As a result, their viva experience was disheartening as they were stressful, and some were even traumatised. However, other PhD candidates spoke positively about their experiences. They commented that the examiners were friendly and that the PhD viva was enjoyable.

These differences in the experiences of the candidates illustrate the multiple realities of the viva. Indeed, I believe that reality is a matter of perspective. Even if the participants are from the same viva, there can be different interpretations of the experience, as was found in a case study of a team of viva participants at a New Zealand university (Tan & Kumar, 2013). In this case study, while the convenor and examiner expressed that their viva experiences were pleasant, that they thought it went well and that it was a good discussion, the supervisor and candidate indicated that the viva was unpleasant. The candidate further expressed that her negative feeling came from the uncertainty of the process leading into the viva. This confirmed for me that there is no absolute truth, as there exist multiple realities, and reality is an individual construction (Merriam, 2009).

Along with my ontological view of multiple realities, I also believe that epistemology or knowledge is constructed and understood in one's mind rather than discovered. Epistemology is 'an area of philosophy concerned with the creation of knowledge; [it]

focuses on how we know what we know or what are the most valid ways to reach truth' (Neuman, 2011, p. 93). I performed a literature search on the PhD viva at a preliminary level to gain a better understanding of the topic. I found that even though the history of the PhD viva could be traced back to as early as the twelfth century, published research could only be found starting in the early twenty-first century. Of this literature, much of it portrayed the PhD viva as a mysterious event (Burnham, 1994; Morley et al., 2002), with knowledge of its workings limited to participants. This prompted me to consider how it would be possible for academics and candidates to be better prepared for the viva.

I asked myself, after spotting some attention-grabbing accounts of the PhD viva, if I were to research this topic, what could be known, and how would I approach it? As I have a strong belief that research is a knowledge construction activity that is guided by a researcher's intention, the first step that I took was drawing on my disciplinary knowledge in applied linguistics to determine how to make sense of the PhD viva from a linguistic perspective. As Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explain, 'no matter how much you [the researcher] try, you cannot divorce your research and writing from your past experiences, who you are, what you believe, and what you value. Being a clean slate is neither possible nor desirable' (p. 38). Thus, my understanding of the constructed knowledge is influenced by my background as an applied linguist.

Examiners who have participated in the viva construct their experiences and actions through their language use. They choose stories they think the listeners are interested in. They choose how the meanings of their stories are presented to the listeners. Therefore, their stories and knowledge of their viva experiences are co-created by the participants and the

researcher, and the meanings or truth are subject to the interpretation of listeners. This view is supported by Denzin and Lincoln (2011), who state ‘all research is interpretive: guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied’ (p. 13). That is, there is no absolute truth in research; the truth is a matter of interpretation by the researchers, guided by their research assumptions and worldviews.

### **3.2 Using a Narrative Approach**

A narrative approach, as a means of understanding human experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), was adapted and utilised as the research approach to achieve the goals of this study. People make sense of their lives through narratives (Bruner, 1991), and people constantly use narratives to explain their experiences, construct meaning on how they understand events and reflect on their experiences (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997; Gergen, 2009). As a narrative approach focusses on the experiences of individuals, it ‘is best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 55). In this study, I explore the narratives of experience of 12 doctoral examiners who have taken part in the PhD viva at a Malaysian research university.

A narrative approach is used in its broader sense to refer to an approach in qualitative research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Narratives, as used in this study, can include stories, interviews or any form of spoken data (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). Although I adopt this definition of a ‘narrative approach’ and ‘narratives’ throughout this study, I recognise that there are different theories and methods of analysis. For example, some researchers might consider a narrative approach as the study of narrative structure (Labov &

Waletzky, 1967), which examines the abstract, orientation, complicating action, coda, evaluation, and result or resolution of the narratives. This study, however, did not focus on the narrative structure. People who tell stories are narrators; therefore, the examiners in this study are narrators who are revealing their viva experiences.

A narrative approach was chosen for three main reasons. Firstly, a narrative approach allows for the exploration of subjectivity in individual experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It allows participants to share their stories and describe what is important and meaningful to them. People tell and retell stories in their daily lives. By choosing which stories or events to share, linking them in a particular way, omitting or including certain details, narrators construct the meaning they would like the listener to hear (Yin, 2009). In this study, participants were invited to share their stories in interviews. Using these stories, I could explore the meanings that the participants attributed to the PhD viva event and the experiences they encountered in the viva. The participants' narratives provided useful information about the viva, how they made sense of their stories and how they wished their meaning to be conveyed in the stories.

Secondly, a narrative approach provides researchers insight into otherwise inaccessible events, like the PhD viva. It is well documented in the literature that a PhD viva is a private event in higher education (Burnham, 1994). Only members who are directly involved in the PhD viva will be granted access. Because the PhD viva is almost always a closed-door event, people only hear about what happened in the viva, rather than seeing it for themselves. By using a narrative approach, information of the viva could be made

available to the public. Narratives of the viva are therefore a valuable form of data for researchers.

A synthesis of the research studies on the PhD viva showed that existing studies are generally ‘narrated’ (see Chapter Two). This means the findings are mostly reported based on individual accounts. Carter (2008), for example, reported examiner practices from an informal panel discussion. She identified the voices of examiners, with implications for being an oral examiner in the New Zealand context. Another example that drew on individual accounts is that of Wallace (2003). He recounted the experiences of six PhD candidates based on their narratives and found that these candidates experienced the viva differently even when the outcome of their viva was successful. Based on this, he urged the institutions to monitor the viva processes, and examiner practices in particular. Carter (2008) and Wallace’s (2003) studies, based on narrative accounts, have provided a snapshot of viva experiences that warrants reflection and further action. Without narratives like these, the PhD viva would remain unknown and unmonitored.

There is a good reason that the findings of most PhD viva studies in the past two decades have been based on narratives of experience. With only a few exceptions (e.g. Trafford & Leshlem, 2002; Trafford, 2003), the lack of access to the viva poses difficulty for researchers to collect first-hand data. For this reason, it is more practical to seek information from participants who have been involved in the viva, such as by interviewing them. This is supported by Goffman (1959), who suggested using actors’ off-stage performance to make sense of their on-stage performance. This provides an alternative way to investigate the viva: the experiences of examiners can shed light on how the viva unfolds,

rather than having to observe their actual practice. Therefore, the stories told by participants continue to be central to understanding the viva.

Lastly, the emphasis on the ‘narrative turn’ in doctoral education makes the use of a narrative approach significant. In 2012, the theme for the international Quality in Postgraduate Research (QPR) conference, a biannual conference for researches in doctoral education, was *Narratives of transition: Perspectives of research leaders, educators, and postgraduates*. At this conference, stories either from the analysis of narratives or narrative analysis (Savin-Baden & Van Nierkerk, 2007) were examined. The wide range of presentation topics included supervision, academic writing, research training and the transition to becoming a researcher (Kiley, 2012). The studies presented drew on different theoretical perspectives of narrative inquiry and demonstrated the value of using a narrative approach to explore individual experiences in doctoral education research.

Furthermore, using a narrative approach to explore doctoral assessment has become tremendously important. Previous studies of examiners’ experiences have successfully used a narrative approach to offer insights into their examined topic. Numerous research issues have been explored by drawing on the subjective experiences of individuals. Kiley and Mullins’s (2002, 2004) studies of the assessment experiences of experienced and inexperienced examiners in marking written theses were excellent examples of narrative studies. Although the researchers did not specify the use of a narrative approach, their studies, which drew on interview data, could be seen as narrative-based studies (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber, 1998). The researchers interviewed examiners in Australian universities on how they examine a thesis. From the analysis of the examiner narratives, the

researchers yielded useful insights into thesis examination that benefited the doctoral community.

Despite the feasibility of using a narrative approach, limitations are also observed. One main limitation is that studies using a narrative approach often have a small sample size, limiting their objectivity and generalisability. A narrative approach is used to target a specific group (Cresswell, 2014), usually of 10–15 participants. Interviewing a large group of participants is not feasible given the nature of a narrative approach (e.g., interview collection and analysis), which is often time-consuming (Cresswell, 2014).

A narrative approach was used in this study to collect interviews with PhD viva examiners. I have attempted to share examiners' voices, as their experiences in the PhD viva have been under-represented in doctoral education research, especially in Malaysia. Not including other views, such as those of students, was deliberately done for practical purposes. While collecting data from other sources might have provided a more holistic view of the viva, it was decided that the subjective truth or views of examiners should be the focus in this study, rather than looking for general or absolute truths (Casanave, 2010).

### **3.3 MY University as the Research Site**

The data for this study were collected from a research university in Malaysia, referred to as MY University (a pseudonym). It is a public university that offers a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The programs offered include over 250 fields of study; for instance, educational studies, engineering, science, medicine and health sciences, linguistics and agriculture. For postgraduate programs, a variety of masters and doctoral

degrees are offered. A PhD at MY University is research-based, requiring the candidate to conduct research under supervision, produce a thesis and take part in the doctoral assessment. The end goal of a PhD graduate, as stated in the MY University's Graduate School website, is to have achieved the following learning outcomes:

- i) Synthesising knowledge in the relevant field;
- ii) Adapting practical skills leading towards innovative ideas in the relevant field;
- iii) Providing professional services to society in the relevant field;
- iv) Conducting research independently and adhering to the legal, ethical and professional code of practice in the relevant field;
- v) Communicating and working effectively with peers, scholarly communities and stakeholders, while displaying leadership qualities;
- vi) Appraising problems in the relevant field critically using scientific skills; and
- vii) Integrating information to develop lifelong learning in the relevant field.

MY University was selected as the research site for two reasons. First, MY University is a typical research university in Malaysia and adopts a mandatory closed-door viva for its doctoral assessment. As the PhD viva is the subject of interest in this study, the university is considered theoretically ideal. Second, I intend to contribute to the postgraduate support and professional development of doctoral examiners, particularly on the viva, because I worked at this research university at the time of undertaking this study. Examining the doctoral examination practices at the university was expected to provide a local scenario that would benefit the doctoral community. Thus, my choice of research site was not only theoretically based but was also pragmatic.

### **3.4 The Doctoral Assessment at MY University**

At MY University, the doctoral assessment is categorised into two components: a written thesis examination and the viva. Each of these components is explained next.

#### **3.4.1 A written thesis examination**

A doctoral examination committee is formed once the notice of submission of thesis is received by the Graduate School. This usually takes place six months prior to submission. The committee comprises three examiners and a chairperson. A PhD thesis is usually examined by two internal examiners from the same department or university, and one external examiner from a university abroad. The selected examiners must fulfil the following criteria: have supervised a PhD candidate to graduation, hold a PhD degree in a related field, hold a position as either an associate professor or professor at a university, and be research active. In addition, a chairperson, who is a senior academic with a PhD, is nominated to moderate the PhD viva and to submit a final examination report with the assessment outcome to the Graduate School.

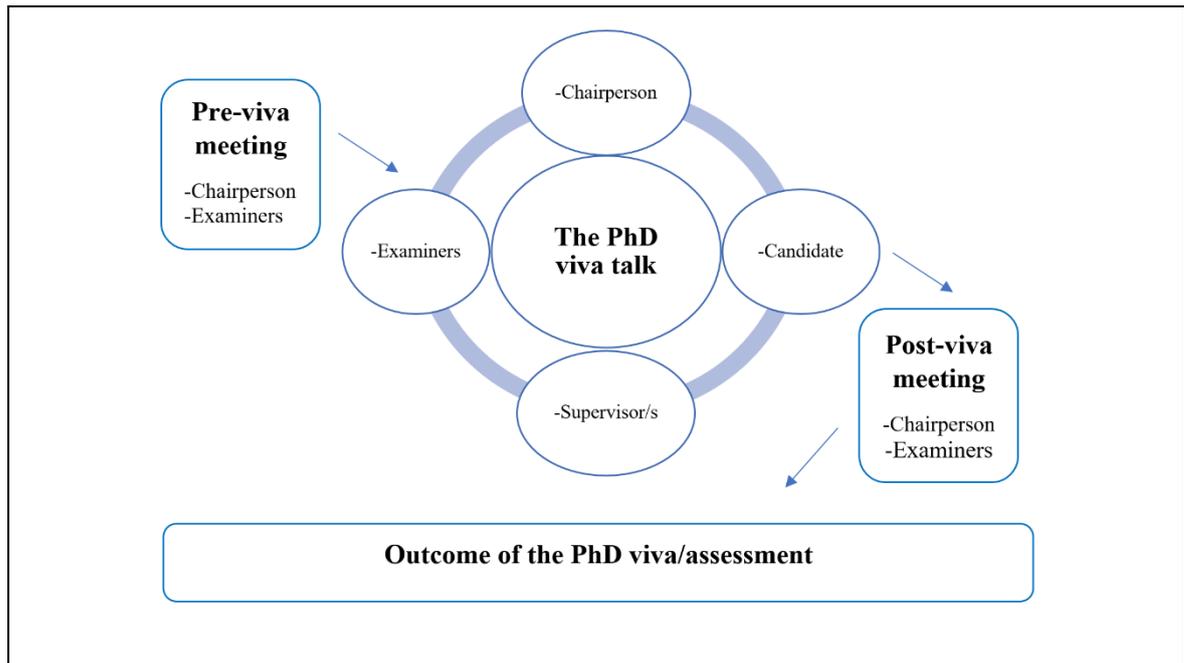
The examiners receive a copy of the thesis together with an examination guide to help them to prepare an examiner report independently. The examiner report follows the typical structure of a thesis; namely, introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and discussion, and conclusion. The examiners are expected to provide comments on the topics mentioned in the examiner report template (see Appendix A). After submission of the examiner reports, the examiners are expected to participate in the viva. Normally, the internal examiners would be present. The chairperson acts on behalf of the external examiner. At times, external examiners participate via Skype. It is not mandatory for the

external examiner to be present, but his/her presence would be welcomed. The examiners are expected to make a final decision on the assessment outcome based on the written thesis and the viva.

### **3.4.2 The PhD viva**

Once all the written examiner reports have been received, the PhD viva will be scheduled by the staff at the Graduate School. The staff contact all the parties involved, including the chairperson, examiners and PhD candidate, to fix a convenient date and time for the viva. The viva is usually conducted in one of the eight viva rooms in the Graduate School. It is a closed-door event.

The PhD viva is divided into three parts: the pre-viva meeting, the viva talk and the post-viva meeting (see Figure 3). The pre-meeting takes place among the chairperson and two examiners. The purpose of this meeting is to identify matters to be discussed, such as areas of concern, the focus of the thesis and the distribution of questions. After the pre-meeting, the PhD candidate will appear before the chairperson, the panel of examiners (normally only the two internal examiners) and his/her supervisor/s (invited as silent observers), and the talk with the candidate will commence.



**Figure 3.** A typical PhD viva model at MY university

The candidate is required to give a 20-minute oral presentation about the research, followed by a question-and-answer session. On average, the viva will last 1–3 hours for all disciplines. Examiners are free to ask any questions relating to the thesis. While the examiners will normally use the examiner report as a guide, the questions in the viva are usually not confined to the examiner reports.

Once the examiners have covered their points and listened to the answers given by the candidate, a post-viva meeting between the chairperson and examiners is held to review the candidate’s oral performance and finalise the assessment outcome. During this meeting, the candidate and supervisors are asked to wait in a separate room. Once consensus among the examiners and chairperson has been reached, the candidate is called back and told informally of the outcome, of which there are seven possibilities:

- 1) Accepted with Distinction;
- 2) Accepted with Minor Modifications;
- 3) Accepted with Major Modifications
- 4) Oral Re-examination (Re-viva voce);
- 5) Resubmission of Thesis;
- 6) Resubmission as a Masters Thesis;
- 7) Rejection of Thesis (Fail).

When the assessment outcome indicates that the thesis has been accepted, the candidate will be given one month to make minor modifications or two months for major modifications. The chairperson compiles a list of corrections and amendments to be made and forwards it to the candidate after the viva. Once the corrections have been made to the satisfaction of the internal examiner, the chairperson submits a final report to the Graduate School. Based on the recommendation in the final report, the Senate then confers the degree. However, if the assessment outcome is for resubmission or re-viva, the candidate is expected to resubmit the thesis for examination or re-sit the oral examination within 60 days from the first viva (see Appendix A, Section D).

### **3.5 Obtaining Research Ethics Approval and Access**

Research ethics were considered, and consent was sought before the commencement of the data collection. Sieber (1993) points out that ‘ethics has to do with the application of moral principles to prevent harming or wronging others, to promote the good, to be respectful and to be fair’ (p. 14). Thus, stringent procedures were followed. I first consulted the Māori committee for research consultation in April 2012. At the University of Otago, it

is obligatory for all the researchers to consult the Māori committee before working on any research proposal in any areas of research. The purpose of this consultation was to allow Ngāi Tahu (an indigenous Māori group) to have a chance to participate in the research planning. The Māori committee viewed my research as important and provided some recommendations for me to include in my study such as the inclusion of Māori participants. However, I could not take that into consideration because my data were collected from a research site in Malaysia and not in New Zealand.

After the consultation with the Māori committee, I proceeded to obtain ethics approval from the relevant universities. In June 2012, I submitted my human ethics form to the University of Otago outlining my research objectives, proposed data collection methods, semi-structured interview questions and participant consent forms (see Appendix B). I received the approval letter from the university in July 2012. Then I gained permission from my targeted Malaysian university, MY University, for data collection purposes. A formal letter was written to the Dean of the Graduate School at MY University requesting permission to collect data. My application was approved based on the Otago ethics approval, and further clearance was not needed. Once I received approval from MY University, I invited participants to my research via email. Only experienced examiners were selected (see Section 3.6.1 Invitation of participants). I contacted all doctoral examiners who had expressed an interest in participating and informed them about my research purpose, data collection methods and purposes, and requested their consent to participate. I informed the examiners that their participation in my study was entirely voluntary and without coercion, undue influence or pressure.

Lastly, I obtained consent from my participants before collecting data for this study. Once my participants were identified, I informed them that any identifiable information such as their name, job title, email address or discipline would be kept strictly confidential. I also informed my participants that the data collected would be handled with care. It would only be accessed by the researcher and the researcher's supervisors, kept in a locked file cabinet and destroyed after the completion of the study. I informed my participants that their identities would remain anonymous in my study and that their information would only be used for my study and any publications arising from it. Care was taken to ensure the participants' anonymity by using pseudonyms.

### **3.6 Data Collection Procedures**

I proceeded to data collection once the research ethics approval was in place. Two procedures for data collection—invitation of participants and methods of data collection—are discussed below.

#### **3.6.1 Invitation of participants**

Doctoral examiners from MY University were recruited as the participants for interviews. They were selected using the criterion and snowball sampling methods (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010). I started off inviting examiners via personal contacts. Then, I expanded my recruitment by employing other strategies such as asking for suggestions from the deans of all faculties at MY University. Lastly, I asked for recommendations from the interviewees. This snowball sampling based on the recommendations of the participants in this study and the faculty deans at the university resulted in additional participants. Approximately 150 invitation emails were sent to the targeted examiners (see Appendix C) and some follow-up phone calls were made. A total of 18 examiners agreed to take part in

the interview. However, some examiners subsequently withdrew due to time commitments and personal reasons. A total of 12 examiners were interviewed successfully.

The selection criterion for examiners to be invited to take part in this study was that they had to have examined and participated in at least five PhD vivas at MY University. This selection criterion was based on Mullins and Kiley's (2002) definition of an experienced examiner as one who has examined five theses. Some of the examiners recruited had examined in more than 10 doctoral vivas, both within and external to the university. Also, some of the examiners had experience in chairing the viva. Examiners were recruited from across disciplines: four from the social sciences, five from the applied sciences and three from the sciences (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Doctoral examiner profile

No	Name (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Discipline	Title
1.	Rebecca	F	Applied Science	Professor
2.	Sally	F	Social Science	Associate Professor
3.	Alex	M	Applied Science	Professor
4.	Anabelle	F	Applied Science	Associate Professor
5.	Nancy	F	Social Science	Associate Professor
6.	Hellen	F	Applied Science	Professor
7.	Cassie	F	Applied Science	Associate Professor
8.	Neil	M	Social Science	Senior Lecturer
9.	Patrick	M	Science	Professor
10.	Thomas	M	Science	Professor
11.	Ruby	F	Social Science	Associate Professor
12.	Lambert	M	Science	Professor

In line with my constructivist position, I believed that knowledge co-constructed with the 12 examiners would provide a rich description of their examining practices of the viva within MY University. I was also mindful of disciplinary practices that might bring differences. For that reason, I referred to existing literature to help draw connections and to support my interpretations of the data (Mills, 2006). This was known as an act of theory triangulation (Cresswell, 2014) to increase the validity of the discussions in the study.

### **3.6.2 Methods of data collection and justifications**

The primary data for this study were the interviews with examiners. Secondary data, institutional narrative, such as documents, informal conversations and personal/phone/email communications were also collected to enrich my understanding of the issue. However, while the secondary data were referred to for background and to explain the subject matter, they were not all included in the thesis. The bulk of the empirical data were collected over three months during visits to MY University.

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with doctoral examiners to gain an understanding of their experiences in the doctoral viva at MY University. Interview is a means of collecting data ‘from people about opinions, beliefs and feelings about situations in their own words’ (Ary, Jacobs & Sorensen, 2010, p. 438). It is often used as a central method of data collection in qualitative research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Silverman, 2013). The use of semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewer to elicit information from the interviewees to answer the research questions and allowed further explorations that were not pre-determined (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Several issues were explored surrounding the examiners’ viva experiences and practices in the PhD viva (see Appendix D).

The use of interviews as the primary instrument in this study was not only practical but also theoretically grounded. Morley, Leonard and David (2002) described the PhD viva as ‘seldom witnessed or observed by anyone not involved in the examination process, which poses challenges both for monitoring and for researching the assessment process’ (pp. 268–269). Thus, interviews offered the opportunity to gain insights from the doctoral examiners about the PhD viva. Prior to the interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with two academics to find out the comprehensiveness and acceptability of the questions. Several interview questions were refined to allow flexibility for participants to express their views, and for clarity. The actual interviews lasted between 40 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewees.

The interview method has two main drawbacks that should be acknowledged. The first of these is their subjective nature. During interviews, participants tend to reveal the information that they think the researcher wants to hear (Yin, 2009). For example, an examiner might only talk about their good examining practice in the PhD viva only. Such bias in the narratives could affect the completeness of the data. To overcome this problem, I cross-checked the examiners’ interviews against one another and with some of the examiners, as well as the related literature, as a form of triangulation (Cresswell, 2014).

Another drawback can be the quality of the interviews. As the interviews are highly reliant on the narratives given by participants, the length and richness of the data are essential (Cresswell, 2014). For example, during the interviews, I realised that not all the examiners were expressive and forthcoming. Some examiners provided only a little information, while others spoke at length but with no information relevant to the interview questions. Though

this posed problems during analysis, I attempted to focus on the relevant narratives given by the examiners.

To better understand the PhD viva at MY University, institutional narrative was also collected and referred to in this study. This included documents such as MY University policy documents and doctoral assessment guidelines. These documents provided an understanding of the doctoral assessment regulations and the PhD viva process at the university. Due to the sensitive nature of the information in some of these documents, not all of them could be presented here, to maintain confidentiality.

Informal conversation supplemented the study as a secondary source of data (Arksey & Knight, 1999). These conversations were not as rigorous as the interviews (Chin, 1994). They were not recorded, instead taking place during tea breaks, lunch hours, functions or events. Throughout my data collection period, I communicated with many academics, management staff and PhD candidates at MY University in an attempt to deepen my understanding of the PhD viva and doctoral education at that university.

Personal/phone/email communication was employed to arrange and facilitate my data collection, and to clarify some unclear issues with the research participants after the interviews.

### **3.7 Data Management and Analysis**

The data were managed and analysed thematically using thematic analysis, as discussed below. Some researchers, however, label this method of analysis simply as qualitative data analysis (Kim, 2016), or general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). Regardless of the different terms for this method of analysis, it involves the search for key themes or patterns in the data.

#### **3.7.1 Managing data**

I created a database called 'PhD' on my computer for storage. In this database, I stored the raw information obtained from the research site, including the interview recordings, interview transcripts and related documents. I also stored the literature resources that I gathered.

#### **3.7.2 Managing ideas**

The interviews with examiners were transcribed verbatim. I first read the transcripts to obtain a general idea of the narratives of experience. Using an inductive approach (Cresswell, 2014), I examined and coded the interview transcripts for frequent and significant themes. I did a cross-comparison of the transcripts to identify most of the themes, similar patterns, variations of ideas and notable discursive resources. I also reviewed the secondary data documents, such as the assessment policies, and previous research for understanding and idea extraction. I then captured my thoughts and ideas about the interviews, follow-ups and documents by making notes.

### **3.7.3 Querying data**

Once the interview transcripts were coded, I asked questions to make sense of the codes. I referred to the documents, and considered the links between the codes, documents and theoretical literature in answering my research purpose and questions.

### **3.7.4 Reporting from the data**

Once the analysis was done, I reported the findings which organised around the research questions. The three main themes discussed are: (1) the purposes of the PhD viva, (2) expectations of the candidate's oral performance, (3) learning to examine and examination challenges. Once the themes were decided, I chose the best examples to represent the examiners' voices for each theme. However, I did not include all the voices in the case of similar responses to avoid redundancy. The three main themes are reported in Chapters Four to Six and offer insight into the examiners' practices and experiences of the PhD viva. An implication arose from the findings which provided useful information to inform examiner preparation and training is also reported in Chapter Seven.

### **3.7.5 Example of data analysis**

The following is an example of how the data were analysed and presented in this study. It provides a snapshot of the data analysis for the first finding on the purposes of the viva in Chapter Four.

*Example: Verbatim excerpt from a participant, Thomas.*

Me : So in a viva what do you normally aim to achieve?

Thomas: There are a few criteria or factors that we would like to look at. First of all, we would like to know the, whether the scope of work for a PhD candidate is it sufficient to cover, I mean, to actually, at the end of the viva session, we give a Pass, you know, or Fail to a candidate but when we give, decided to pass the candidate, so are they sufficient to let the candidate carry the, the, I mean, the name, I mean doctorate. So, which is very important that we look at the scope of work...

- First, I read through the response given by Thomas and extracted meaningful ideas. In this instance, I was interested to find out about Thomas's examination practices in regard to what he examines in the viva. From his response, I noticed about the ideas of 'checking the scope of work', 'sufficient to cover', 'pass or fail' 'carry ... doctorate'.
- Next, I coded Thomas's response as the 'breadth and depth of research' because his ideas could be interpreted as wanting to check if the candidate had demonstrated a good understanding of the research area (breadth) and in the research topic (depth) in order to be worthy of a PhD. I also asked several questions when analysing his response. For example:
  - Why did Thomas gave such a response?
  - Was he atypical in the viva?
  - How did his response shape the purpose of the viva?

After thinking about what Thomas said and after checking the literature on the viva, as well as on what examiners do in the assessment. I finally coded Thomas's idea as 'quality checking'.

- Then, I presented my analysis of Thomas's response as below.
  - For Thomas, the breadth and the depth of the thesis are indications of quality. He aims to discover whether the thesis has adequate research coverage to warrant the PhD degree. Then he makes a judgement based on the thesis presented.
- Lastly, I categorised the idea of 'quality checking' as part of the purpose of gatekeeping since Thomas, like other examiners, focuses on the quality of the research thesis submitted before making a decision for the assessment.

### **3.8 How This Study Could be Judged?**

In addition to satisfying the thesis examination criteria at the University of Otago (see Appendix E), this study can be judged to meet a further four criteria: having a worthy topic, being sincere, being ethical and making a significant contribution. These criteria come from the eight suggested by Tracy (2010) for judging the quality of a study:

- |                 |                         |                             |
|-----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1) Worthy topic | 4) Rich rigour          | 7) Sincerity                |
| 2) Credibility  | 5) Resonance            | 8) Significant contribution |
| 3) Ethical      | 6) Meaningful coherence |                             |

(p. 839)

These criteria helped me to reflect on my goals in this study and on my skills as a researcher. I discuss each criterion in turn.

This study is a worthy topic, as I seek to examine the experiences of examiners in the viva. A worthy topic is one that is ‘relevant, timely, significant, and interesting’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). The study is relevant and timely because examiners are confronted with evolving challenges in doctoral assessment in the twenty-first century, and yet knowledge on examining in the viva is fragmented. By considering the meanings as well as the narratives of examiners, this study can be described as stimulating. Existing studies on examiners tend to focus on what examiners do rather than on their experiences of learning to examine and on the potential support needed. With this study, it is possible to identify the examining practices and needs of examiners, insight that not only adds to the doctoral assessment literature but will contribute to examiners’ professional development.

This study was also conducted ethically. Ethics are classified into ‘procedural ethics, situational and culturally specific ethics, relational ethics and existing ethics’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). At the beginning of the study, I applied for procedural ethics clearance from both the university at which I am doing my PhD, and the university at which I collected the data. I also asked for informed consent from my participants before the interviews. While interviewing, I was mindful of relational ethics and monitored my actions, speech and behaviours when eliciting information from the participants. Through ensuring my ethical conduct, I aim to become an ethical researcher.

I consider that this study demonstrates sincerity. ‘Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s), and the transparency about the methods and challenges’ is crucial (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). I have illustrated my reflexivity in Sections 3.1-3.7 of this chapter, from the initial conception of the study to data collection and analysis. I have done this by discussing my view of knowledge and reality, making transparent the methods used in this study, describing and justifying my choice of methodology.

Lastly, this study makes a significant contribution. A study that makes a significant contribution is described as ‘having a significant contribution, in terms of conceptually/theoretically, practically, morally, methodologically and heuristically’ (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). In the study, I joined and expanded the conversations of researchers around doctoral assessment and the PhD viva, focussing on examiner practices. My findings extend the current knowledge on how examiners approach the viva. As such, it makes a significant theoretical contribution. In addition, the use of a narrative approach as the methodology gives this study methodological significance. Previous research of the PhD viva has not employed such an approach in making sense of examiner practices and experiences. Lastly, I aimed to achieve practical significance. With the insights obtained in this study, I hope to contribute to examiner training and improve examiner practices in future.

### **3.9 Summary**

This chapter has focused on the qualitative methodology that I used for this study. I have described my constructivist’s research positioning, justified the use of a narrative approach, and argued that using narrative inquiry is a valuable means of deepening understanding of examiner experiences and practices in the PhD viva. A narrative approach

offers a way to make sense of the often-unreachable event, the PhD viva, and examiner practices.

The next four chapters focus on the findings and discussions of the study. In Chapter Four, I examine the purposes of the viva as perceived by the examiners. In Chapter Five, I identify the examiners' expectations of candidate's performance. In Chapter Six, I examine how the participants learned to examine and the examination challenges they have faced. Lastly, in Chapter Seven, I reflect on the findings and discussions so far and propose a framework for supporting examiners and their practices.

## **Chapter Four: Finding I.**

### **Redefining the Purposes of the PhD Viva**

In this chapter, I focus on the narratives of examiners to investigate the purposes of the PhD viva. Specifically, I address the first sub-research question: *What are examiners' conceptualisations of the purposes of the viva?* The PhD viva may be conceptualised and operationalised in diverse ways in higher education. Therefore, identifying the purposes underlying examiner practices has implications for better, research-informed examiner practice in the PhD viva. Answering this question also realises the first purpose of the study that is to discover the practices of examiners and their experiences in the PhD viva within the Malaysian context.

From my analysis of the examiners' narratives, I reveal that the viva served multiple purposes including gatekeeping, empowerment, dialogue and enculturation. In the viva, examiners focus on the quality of the research thesis to enable the candidate to demonstrate mastery of the research subject, initiate dialogue for research engagement and to socialise the candidate to the disciplinary community. These findings are in line with those observed in earlier studies and further contribute to a conceptual model of the purposes of the oral examination that could be used in guiding examiner practices. I also highlight that the examiners studied are largely influenced by the oral performance of the candidate in deciding and achieving the purposes of the viva. Thus, this affirms the significant role that oral communication plays in the PhD viva within the Malaysian doctoral education context.

## 4.1 Introduction

Examiners who examine with clear purposes are likely to achieve the best possible outcomes in doctoral assessments. Once the purposes are ascertained, examiners have a good sense of direction in the viva. They can design and ask questions around the purposes of the viva to elicit students' responses and this helps in the assessment decision-making. If the purposes of the viva are ill-defined, examiners may examine in their own way to achieve whatever purpose they have in mind. Lack of clarity of the purposes in assessment may cause confusion and have negative effects, not only on the student, but also on the examination. Therefore, to achieve a better doctoral assessment it is crucial to identify the purposes of the viva.

The purposes of the viva are a disputable issue in higher education (see Chapter Two), thus, determining it is not straightforward. Although the viva is widely perceived as an examination (Kelly, 2010; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000), a review of existing studies shows that the purposes of the viva are varied and are dependent on the countries, institutions, doctoral assessment system and examiners (Kyvik, 2014; Powell & Green, 2007; Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). Previous research (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004) has observed that the viva primarily serves an examination purpose, as well as providing development opportunities and acting as a ritualistic event. According to Tinkler and Jackson, in the oral examination examiners usually examine for:

- the authentication of the candidate's thesis;
- the candidate's ability to locate PhD research in the broader context;

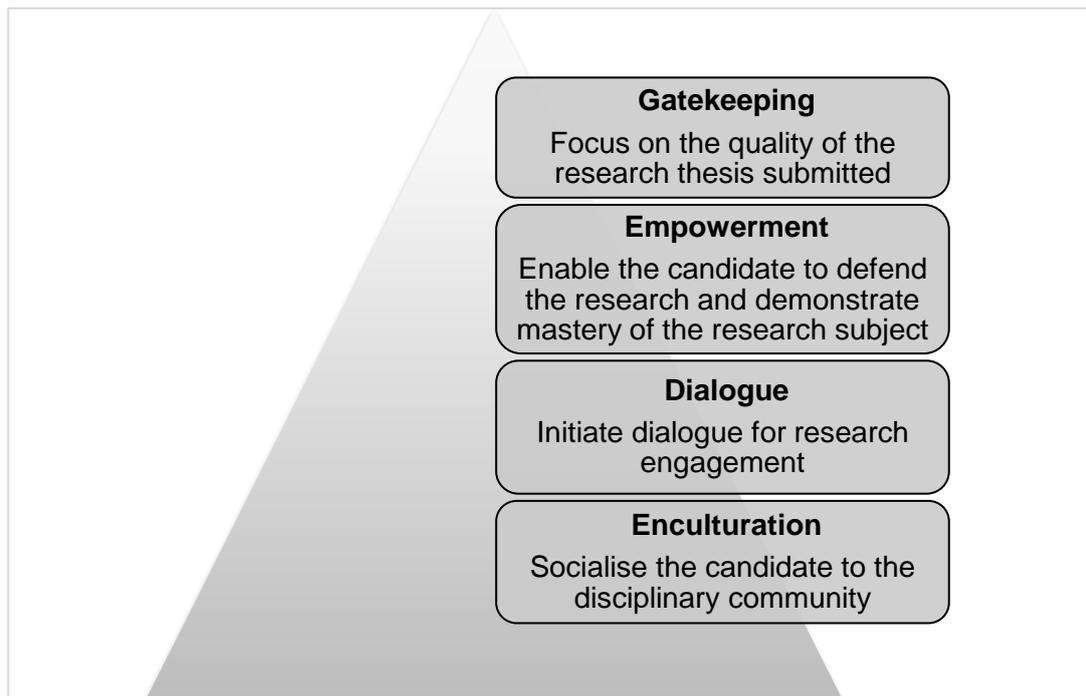
- the candidate's understanding and ability to produce and present research to PhD standard;
- the candidate's ability to defend the thesis;
- the final decision of borderline cases;
- clarification of obscurities and areas of weakness;
- the candidate's oral skills;
- the qualities to be accepted to the academic community (gatekeeping).

The researchers further argue that examiners do not usually achieve all the examination purposes. A determinant of the purposes is often driven by the quality of the candidate's thesis (see Chapter Two). While Tinkler and Jackson's list of tasks that the examiners undertake in the viva provides a useful understanding of the examination purpose, there is very little understanding on how examiners decide the examination purpose. Since there are different examination purposes of the viva and it is unlikely all the purposes will be achieved in a viva, it is crucial to find out the purposes of the viva in different higher education context, including Malaysia.

In this chapter, I attempt to examine the purposes of the viva as perceived by the examiners at MY University. To recognise the purposes of the oral examination, it is best to learn from experienced examiners who have examined in the viva. Examiners are the gatekeepers for the PhD assessment; therefore, gaining insights into their experiences and beliefs is crucial to developing a greater understanding of examiner practices of the viva within the Malaysian context.

## 4.2 Conceptualising the Purposes of the PhD Viva

In the following sections, I describe and explain the purposes of the PhD viva as viewed by the examiners in this study. Analysis of the narratives of examiners on their practices in the viva revealed that the viva served four purposes: i) gatekeeping, ii) empowerment, iii) dialogue and iv) enculturation (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** A conceptual model of the purposes of the PhD viva

Each purpose illustrated in Figure 4 is arranged according to the emphasis of examiners in the interviews from the bottom (gatekeeping) to the top (enculturation). It has been presented with evidence from the interviews with the examiners and is further discussed. The purposes are explained in detail in the next section.

### **4.2.1 Gatekeeping**

For the examiners in this study, the main purpose of the PhD viva is gatekeeping. Gatekeeping means the examiners examine the PhD by focussing on the quality of the research thesis submitted by the candidate and discussing it in the oral examination. This purpose is fundamental to the doctoral assessment in MY University, as is evident in the MY University's Graduate Studies Rules:

A student pursuing a PhD degree with thesis shall:

(i) submit a thesis for examination at the end of the study

The final examination shall consist of an evaluation of the thesis and a viva voce to determine the student's competency in the field of study. For the jointly awarded/dual degree student, the requirements for thesis submission are as stipulated in the MoA between the two institutions.

(Graduate Studies Rules, MY University, 2003)

The Graduate Studies Rules state that candidates who aim to obtain a PhD degree from MY University must submit their thesis for examination and take part in a viva. Examiners are invited to conduct the assessment and complete two examination tasks: examine a written thesis and take part in the viva. The examiners are expected to make a recommendation of the assessment outcome once the written thesis assessment has been submitted and the viva has taken place.

In serving the gatekeeping purpose, examiners have a sense of responsibility to ensure the quality of the thesis is of a PhD level. Examiners who were interviewed expressed

four viewpoints on their practices in the viva that served the purpose of gatekeeping. These views include checking the thesis for authenticity, doctoral quality, contribution to knowledge and providing feedback for improvement. Each of these views is explained in detail. First, all examiners had the view that assessing the authenticity of the thesis was crucial. As the PhD is the highest degree offered by the university and is recognised internationally, it is the job of the examiners, as gatekeepers, to ensure the candidates wrote the thesis themselves. A recurrent narrative illustrated by the examiners such as Nancy is that:

... when we ask question the purpose is to find out whether the work is genuinely done by the student. So that is, that is, also one of the functions whether, you know, that the student actually spend the effort in doing the work or whether it was done by another person. We ask questions. You know, if the candidate fail to answer several questions. There is a big doubt that, you know, he did not, he or she did not spend the time, you know, in working on the, their research or their study.

(Nancy)

For Nancy, it appears that the notion of gatekeeping is about authenticity verification. Authenticity is verified in two senses: the written thesis and research. Nancy expects the submitted work to be reliable and that the thesis is written by the candidate. It also means the submitted work must not have been plagiarised, but is an original academic exercise written by the candidate under supervision. To verify authenticity and to prevent academic dishonesty, Nancy checks whether the candidate has conducted the research. She wants to ensure that the presented research is authentic. The candidate is responsible for the research in terms of research conceptions, data collection, analysis and interpretation and presentations. Like other examiners, Nancy expects the thesis under examination to be written in an ethical manner. This authenticity verification is usually conducted in the viva

when examiners have the chance to talk to the candidate. The rationale of ensuring the authenticity of the thesis is to prevent research misconduct (Mitchell & Carroll, 2008).

Another view of gatekeeping is that the examiners assess whether the thesis is of doctoral quality. It is expected that the thesis presented in the assessment should be at a doctoral level at MY University. Some examiners (Thomas, Sally and Cassie) explicitly expressed that they check whether the candidate's thesis meets the requirement of a PhD. For example, Thomas stated that:

First of all, we would like to know the, whether the scope of work for a PhD candidate is it sufficient to cover, I mean, to actually, at the end of the viva session, we give a Pass, you know, or Fail to a candidate but when we give, decided to pass the candidate, so are they sufficient to let the candidate carry the, the, I mean, the name, I mean doctorate. So, which is very important that we look at the scope of work.

(Thomas)

For Thomas, the breadth and the depth of the thesis are indications of quality. He aims to discover whether the thesis has adequate research coverage to warrant the PhD degree. Then he makes a judgement based on the thesis presented. His notion of breadth and depth is in line with other examiners (i.e., Pearce, 2004).

A third view of gatekeeping, in which all the examiners were in agreement, is that examiners look for contribution to knowledge. For the PhD, a contribution to knowledge is the most important criterion. This criterion distinguishes the quality of the thesis as either master's degree or PhD standard (Pearce, 2004). An example narrated by Rebecca is that:

We're not looking for new knowledge contribution that will blow up the world you know. But for the PhD you're expecting something new to the body of knowledge that's in the field, okay? And this, this new contribution, they call it new knowledge contribution must be gained through a very rigorous intellectual process and this must be evidenced through the writing and also in the presentation you know that this student actually has done the thinking the analytical process and they know what they talking about. No matter what's, what come out of that, right?

(Rebecca)

For Rebecca, knowledge contribution in a thesis need not be so huge that it would change the world. She expects some form of contribution that the candidate could add to, or expand on, the current literature. Her view of knowledge contribution could be categorised as wanting to see originality in research. In fact, her view is supported by Philips and Pugh (2010) who argued that originality in the PhD could be seen in six ways:

- i) Providing an original technique, observation or result;
- ii) Showing originality in testing someone else's idea/theory;
- iii) Carrying out empirical work that hasn't been done before;
- iv) Providing a new interpretation of existing evidence/theories;
- v) Being cross disciplinary and using different methodologies;
- vi) Looking at areas not previously explored in a particular discipline.

If the research makes an original contribution in any area, such as methodologies, theories and findings as asserted by Philips and Pugh (2010), it would be regarded as knowledge contribution. Rebecca, like other examiners in social sciences, wants to see evidence of the candidate's thoughts and actions towards their proposed research problems. However, this assertion must not be generalised. While contribution to knowledge is the

utmost important criterion in doctoral assessment, examiners tend to have different expectations on knowledge contribution. These are often influenced by the thesis topic and the discipline of the candidates (Clarke & Lunt, 2014)—what is accepted by examiners in the social sciences may not be accepted in the sciences.

Lastly, for gatekeeping purposes, examiners provide constructive feedback with an aim to uphold the standard of the PhD. Two examiners (Lambert and Sally) expressed that if there is a need to improve on the quality of the thesis, they will provide recommendations to assist the candidate in reaching doctoral quality. For instance, Sally stated that:

...as long as the thesis meet the rigors of research and the, the platform is sound, the methodology is sound, I usually don't, you know, kill a student. I would just usually, if there's work that needs to be improved on and I would definitely make suggestions to improve on it.

(Sally)

If an initial assessment finds the thesis is not satisfactory and needs improvement, Sally provides the candidate developmental guidance on how to improve the quality. By giving feedback for improvement, the examiner is performing her gatekeeping responsibility in ensuring that the quality of the PhD thesis is met. Her view confirms Jackson and Tinkler's (2001) study that the viva provides basic development to the candidate.

At MY University, some examiners provide the candidate feedback in a structured manner. They usually begin by addressing issues in introduction, literature review, methodology, findings and conclusions. The examiners follow the structure of the examiner

report since there is no separate report exclusively for the viva (Hellen, personal communication, February 21, 2013).

In summary, the main purpose of the PhD viva is gatekeeping, as evident from the examiners' narratives. Examiners check that the thesis is authentic and that it is of PhD quality. Most importantly, examiners search for contribution to knowledge. Recommendations for improvement in the form of feedback will normally be given to the candidate if the thesis' quality does not meet the examiners' expectations.

#### **4.2.2 Empowerment**

Empowerment is the second purpose of the viva, in which candidates defend their theses and demonstrate mastery of the chosen research subject. Asking for clarification and explanation, as well as testing the candidate's communicative ability in the oral examination are evidence for serving such a purpose. Most of the examiners explained that the viva is to provide candidates the opportunity to clarify, so that the examiners may ascertain if the candidates have mastery of the research topic. The arguments and expressions in the thesis may sometimes be unclear or interpreted differently by the examiners. Therefore, the viva provides a platform for the examiners to seek clarity from the candidate. Hellen indicated that:

Okay. Clarification because before the viva, examiners were given thesis to read, to go through. So, when I read the thesis, some of the thesis there are, you know, statements that are not clear, there are methodologies for example which are not clearly stated or clearly presented in the thesis so, for the clarification on these points need to be clarified during the viva. At the same

time also, I need clarification as for those things that I mentioned to you which is not being properly defined in the thesis.

(Hellen)

Based on the narratives given by Hellen, it appears that she wanted to help the candidate to help themselves on their own terms. She delegated power to the candidate to justify or provide further explanations on the arguments, methodology or areas deemed unclear by the examiner. This is to ensure the thesis has a sound argument and that the methodology is acceptable. Further, examiners clarify areas that are considered weak. Rebecca, for instance, asserts that:

...we just highlight what is the weakness or what's the strength and where to test the student. So after the orals, for those the weakness that we see and is already answered, okay, we just chuck away so we know it's covered....

(Rebecca)

Rebecca seeks clarifications of the weaknesses of the candidate's thesis in the viva. If the candidate can convince her that the weak area is justifiable, or the questions posed are answered, she will normally accept the candidate's responses.

Testing the candidate's communicative ability in the oral examination is another purpose of empowerment. Examiners enable a candidate to defend their ideas and justify their rationales and the way in which their study was conducted, so that examiners can gauge whether the candidate is the subject expert. Examiners want to determine if the candidate possesses the ability to defend as to claim expertise. As illustrated by Cassie:

This is more like you want to see whether the candidate has this PhD ability [to explain orally] because what they have given you is just a written thesis.

(Cassie)

A further explanation on Cassie's narrative is that she expects the candidate to satisfactorily communicate the research. The candidate is expected to delineate their points clearly in the viva, as a way of demonstrating expertise.

#### **4.2.3 Dialogue**

The PhD viva provides the opportunity for dialogue, in which the candidates are expected to engage with the examiners or audiences in the field. In the viva, candidates are provided a space to communicate their research. They are required to give short presentations of their research followed by questions. Some examiners (Thomas, Nancy, Hellen and Sally) indicated that the viva is to test the candidate's ability to express ideas like a scholar, present research and engage in discussion. As Thomas explains:

Yeah. So, this is what many of us say that it is a final quality control stage. Yeah. Because a candidate may be very good with their thesis but they have no interpersonal skills to present their work....

(Thomas)

Thomas had the view that being able to communicate the research outcome is essential. Complete research should not just end up in a thesis, but needs to be disseminated further in avenues such as seminars or conferences. Otherwise the study will be less valued. Therefore, a viva acts as the final platform in assessing the candidate's skills in orally presenting their research and, as such, it is a communication event (Murray, 2003).

In addition, candidates are expected to demonstrate their ability in discussing their work with examiners. An example from Hellen is that:

... and you're able to explain what processes you took, why you did this this way and not that way and so on so forth, why did you analyse your data this way and not that way, for example, yeah? So if you think you're unable to, to do that, it can work negatively for you.

(Hellen)

Like most of the examiners, Hellen relies on the responses given by the candidate when she makes her decision. She anticipates the candidate to have a stance on the matters discussed. However, if the responses given by the candidate are either inadequate or unconvincing, this may influence the viva process and the assessment outcome.

If candidates fail to demonstrate the ability to discuss their research work or answer questions posed by examiners, this will affect their assessment outcome. Candidates who could not communicate to the satisfaction of examiners are likely to be scheduled for a second viva. As evident in the examiner report, a re-viva is an option in the assessment outcome:

Oral re-examination (Re-viva voce)

-fails the first viva voce

-second viva to be conducted within 60 days from the first viva

(Excerpt from the examiner report, MY University)

At MY University, a re-viva is not uncommon. Candidates who are deemed unable to adequately defend their research risk resitting the viva. An examiner, Lambert, recalled a

candidate who was unable to orally defend himself in the viva, even though the thesis was perceived to be good. The candidate was given a second chance but failed the re-viva. The examiners then realised that the candidate had anxiety when speaking, so they asked the candidate to provide written responses to the questions. Finally, once the examiners were satisfied with his responses, the candidate passed the assessment (Thomas, personal communication, February 22, 2013).

#### **4.2.4 Enculturation**

The viva serves the purpose of enculturation in which the candidates are socialised into the disciplinary community. A candidate who successfully obtained a PhD will become a member of an academic discipline, and examiners play an important role in the candidate's PhD process just like their supervisors. While supervisors guide the candidate to research completion, it is the examiners who examine the study and the candidate. Apart from giving feedback and suggestions for improvement and for advancement, examiners test the candidate's knowledge. All the examiners expressed the idea of disciplinary knowledge testing as being part of the viva. Examiners stated that they tested the candidate's understanding of their research and general knowledge in the field. For example, Hellen explained that:

We will ask simple questions or questions related to the keywords... If they say that they are majoring in database for example... they must know what the database is in the first place before they can say that they are an expert in database. Okay, database is a very huge area, there are many issues and they select particular issues, for example as mentioned to you; query processing. So, they must know exactly what query processing in the first place is and how it works. So, this is showing that they know the basic

concepts related to the area and then we move to something more specific to what they have done.

(Hellen)

The example given by Hellen indicates that the candidate had to have a basic understanding of the knowledge in their research field. To hold a PhD degree in a relevant field or be called a disciplinary expert, the candidate should demonstrate sufficient knowledge in the field. The candidate is then expected to situate their research within the wider field. When the candidate exercises their thoughts and actions like a disciplinary member, it shows that the candidate has been socialised into the disciplinary community. However, the process of socialisation did not just happen in the viva. It happened the moment the candidate embarked their PhD. In the viva, examiners complete the socialisation process.

### **4.3 Discussion**

The findings of the study provide an answer to the proposed research question: *What are examiners' conceptualisations of the purposes of the viva?* From the analysis of the examiners' narratives, the purposes of the viva could be conceptualised as gatekeeping, empowerment, dialogue and enculturation. Among these four purposes, gatekeeping is the fundamental purpose of the assessment. For the examiners, completing the doctoral assessment, including an examination of the written thesis and taking part in the viva, is a main priority. An explanation for this is that the examiners want to fulfil their duties as gatekeepers and quality controllers (Wisker & Robinson, 2014). At MY University, the outcome of the doctoral assessment cannot be finalised without taking part in the viva. All the examiners mentioned the activities they conducted in the viva, such as checking the

doctoral quality of the thesis that serves the purpose of gatekeeping. This view is not surprising and complements those of previous studies conducted in the British context (Jackson & Tinkler, 2001) and in the New Zealand context (Kelly, 2010).

In serving the purpose of gatekeeping, checking for authenticity appears to be an indispensable task. In this study, examiners reported unanimously that they checked whether the candidates wrote the thesis themselves. One examiner mentioned an encounter with a candidate who translated some parts of the thesis from one language to English. Because the writing expressions were different, the examiner was suspicious. When probed in the viva, the candidate admitted she had translated and that she had copied from a study conducted in another language. This incident shows the important role of examiners in authorship verification as text-matching software like Turnitin and SafeAssign are not able to detect translation. This incident also gives rise to potential issues in assessment, which perhaps has not been reported in the literature, apart from collaborative authorship (Jackson & Tinkler, 2001) in which the candidate was not the sole author of the study.

In the assessment, apart from gatekeeping, examiners also serve two other purposes: empowerment and dialogue. Examiners provide the candidates the opportunity to defend their research and show mastery of the research subject by initiating dialogue in the viva. Examiners ask questions and seek for clarification from the candidates, and the candidates are expected to respond. While the act of questioning may be regarded as disempowerment—challenging the expertise of the candidate, it is through the exchanges of questions and answers, the examiners will then be able to assess the candidate and achieve the purposes of the assessment.

Moreover, the doctoral assessment is unique—discussion will take place in the viva and feedback will be given. Candidates are expected to explain and clarify any doubts the examiners may have about the thesis and incorporate their feedback into the final revision. If an examiner reports serious concerns, they would normally want to help the candidate to salvage the research (Pearce, 2005). They would also provide feedback and suggestions to the candidates to improve on the quality of the research (Kumar & Stracke, 2011, 2017; Tinkler & Jackson, 2001), as the thesis is often regarded as a work in progress (Bourke, Hattie & Anderson, 2004). If there is no critical concern about the thesis, examiners would then provide advice on further research, career advancement or future research collaboration (Jackson & Tinkler, 2001). The examiners want the candidate to pass, due to the work and time invested by the candidate in doing the research (Kiley, 2009b).

However, the PhD viva should not be considered merely an assessment that serves the purposes of gatekeeping, empowerment, and dialogue. It has a strong aspect of discourse socialisation or enculturation, in which the candidate is socialised into the discourse community. Drawing on Swales's (1990) notion of the discourse community, examiners are expert in the discipline and they socialise new members to the disciplines by assessing the learning of the candidate, helping them to become a legitimate member in the discipline. A candidate who passes the viva would then be recognised as a scholarly member who can conduct and disseminate research of interest to the disciplinary community.

This integrated view of assessment and discourse socialisation is largely supported by research into examiners' views of the purpose of the PhD viva in the British context (Jackson & Tinkler, 2001). In their survey interviews with 30 examiners in UK universities,

Tinkler and Jackson asserted three broad purposes of the viva: examination, development and ritual (see Chapter Two). Although they argued that a viva is not likely to achieve all three purposes depending on the quality of the thesis, the findings in this study suggest that the examiners use their best efforts to take an integrated approach to examining in the PhD viva.

Another notable observation from the findings is that the purposes that shaped the process and outcome of the viva are influenced by the candidate's performance in the PhD viva. Examiners conduct the viva and make final assessment decisions based on the candidate's ability and skills to engage with and convince the examiners. If the candidate's performance in the viva does not meet the satisfaction of the examiners, this has consequences for the conduct of the viva, the decision-making of the examiners and the outcome of assessment. For instance, if a candidate fails to present convincingly in the viva, there may be doubts as to whether they did the study, thus, the suggestion for a re-viva may be considered. As such, the candidate's ability to engage with the examination committee is heavily weighted in the decision-making. This finding resonates with the view of Murray (2009) that the viva is an assessment of the thesis, research and researcher. Writing a quality PhD thesis on a research topic is not sufficient, a candidate must be able to justify or defend it to examiners.

Consequently, this observation reinforces the importance of the oral performance in the PhD viva. The candidates' performance will likely influence the assessment outcome, whether that be good or poor. One anecdotal evidence of this view is that a candidate in MY University had to re-sit a viva because of the unsatisfactory responses they provided in the

viva. Although the candidate had an impressive list of publications, she was still expected to be able to put forward acceptable responses in the PhD viva. While examiners often make their decision before the viva, this decision can only be confirmed after the viva. If the candidate could not provide satisfactory responses in the viva, they will be given a chance to sit for a re-viva or they might be given a written test, according to a report by an examiner in this study.

The findings offer a conceptual understanding of the purposes of the viva and seem to indicate that they are in fact, the building blocks of doctoral assessment. Although gatekeeping is regarded as the main purpose of the PhD viva, the other purposes such as empowerment, dialogue and enculturation are indispensable in achieving the aim of doctoral assessment. As such, it could be argued that the proposed conceptual model of the purpose of the viva (see Figure 4) as a theoretical contribution to the literature could be made explicit to academics. Examiners could design better pedagogy and questions in the viva. Examiners could also review and realign their examining practices around the stated purposes. Academic developers could use the model as a guide in their teaching of the viva when facilitating professional development programs for novice doctoral supervisors and examiners. The model may provide a theoretical underpinning of the purposes of the PhD viva that would help doctoral examiners and supervisors to make sense of the PhD viva and doctoral assessment.

## **4.4 Summary**

From the examiners' narratives, four key purposes were identified—gatekeeping, empowerment, dialogue and enculturation—that govern examiner practices in the PhD viva. How examiners achieve these purposes is likely to be influenced by the candidate's oral performance in the viva. Therefore, to better understand examiner practices, it is crucial to discover the expectations of examiners about the oral performance of candidates in the viva.

In the next chapter, I discuss another important topic: the expectations of examiners in the oral examination. I identify the expectations of the candidate's oral performance in achieving the purposes of the viva, as discussed in this chapter.

## **Chapter Five: Finding II.**

### **Expectations of the Candidate's Performance in the PhD Viva**

Both PhD examiners and handbooks that offer advice about PhD viva preparation appear to share similar expectations of a candidate's performance in the viva. That is, candidates must answer to the satisfaction of examiners. In this instance, satisfaction means the candidate's performance in the PhD viva is up to expectations and warrants a pass in the oral examination. The candidate's performance is likely to influence the examiners' decisions in achieving the purposes of the PhD viva mentioned in Chapter Four. The knowledge that the oral performance expected by examiners is critical has adverse consequences on the process of the viva and the outcome of the doctoral assessment. However, what constitutes a desired satisfactory viva performance—let alone an excellent one—is often undefined and merits investigation.

In this chapter, I focus on the narratives of examiners to investigate the candidate's performance in the PhD viva. I address the second sub-research question: *What are examiners' expectations of the candidates' oral performance in the viva?* I discuss the aspects of a candidate's performance that are expected by examiners such as confident, interactional behaviours, credible and convincing responses and the display of doctoralness. I also discuss the aspects of candidate's performance not desired by the examiners, as well as the reasons for having such expectations. I argue that the expectations of examiners should be made explicit and be communicated to the students and examiners before the viva is conducted.

## 5.1 Introduction

In Malaysia, a PhD will not be considered a pass or fail before the viva. In fact, this examination regulation is evident in many universities that offer the PhD (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). Following is a true story about a PhD candidate, Nurul (not her real name), who took part in the PhD viva at MY university.

### *Nurul's story: Failed the viva*

Nurul is an international student who speaks English as an additional language. She was undertaking her PhD in Science at MY University. Nurul was a prolific researcher who had published three quality manuscripts (arising from her thesis) in reputable, peer-reviewed international journals. At the end of her PhD candidature, Nurul submitted her thesis for examination and took part in the viva. Nurul thought that she would sail through the viva, as she had published three manuscripts. However, she was wrong. She failed the viva. Although Nurul's research was viewed by the examiners as quality work and the thesis was well written, her oral performance in the viva was not satisfactory. She was perceived by the examiners as failing to defend her research orally and she was given the outcome of a re-viva. Nurul was horrified and depressed with the outcome and had no choice but to re-sit the oral examination.

As illustrated in this story, the candidate, Nurul, failed to satisfy the examiner in the oral examination and her ability to defend her research in the viva affected the assessment. Despite her strong efforts in producing and publishing quality work and gaining acceptance in the academic community, Nurul's performance in the viva did not impress the examiners. Therefore, she was given a second chance to make the right impression. While some

researchers might argue that publishing during candidature can provide immunity to candidates and prevent them from failing the assessment, it is not a guarantee, as evidenced by Nurul's story. Candidates must successfully defend their PhD in the viva to pass. Hence, the candidates' oral performance must match the examiners' expectations.

However, there is a lack of understanding about the expectations of examiners in the viva and the notion of a satisfactory oral performance. Existing studies have mainly reported on the issues of practices and procedures of the viva (see Chapter Two). Studies that focus on the PhD viva in progress are limited (e.g., Carter, 2008; Trafford & Leshlem, 2002). Trafford and Leshlem (2002) analysed the views from a viva team (i.e., convenor, examiners, candidate and supervisors) and included their own views in the discussion. They discussed several issues such as pre-viva perceptions, strategies to display doctorateness, behavioural stages, post-viva thoughts, area of focus in the viva and the notion of defence to demonstrate how a decision was made by examiners that was then influenced by the students in the viva.

Carter (2008) conducted an informal focus group research with 23 academics at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, on their experiences of assessing written theses and being a viva examiner. Carter found that the examiners viewed the purpose of the viva as an oral examination and a collegial chat. They noted that the typical length of the viva was two-and-a-half hours. The scope or format of the viva required candidates to give an oral presentation of their work and respond to questions from examiners. Although both Trafford and Leshlem's and Carter's studies have provided valuable insights into the oral

examination, these studies are inadequate to account for the expectations of oral performance.

Lack of knowledge about examiner expectations will presumably bring negative consequences to the candidates and examiners. It not only will hinder the candidate's ability to impress examiners in the viva, but also it will likely hinder examiners in achieving the purposes of the viva effectively, such as gatekeeping, empowerment, dialogue and enculturation (see Chapter Four). In view of the negative effects it might bring, the lack of studies and limited attention given to examiners and the PhD viva, as well as what the examiners expect of a candidate in the PhD viva, shows a promising line of inquiry.

In this chapter, I explore the expectations examiners have of candidates' oral performance in the PhD viva. This chapter aims to discover the assessment practice of examiners and, specifically, what might influence the decision of examiners in PhD viva meetings. This chapter builds on the work of Tinkler and Jackson (2004) on the importance of understanding examiners' expectations and decisions, as there seems to be a 'broad range of standards embraced by the award of a PhD' (p. 119). Through identifying the examiners' expectations, a clearer understanding of the notion of a satisfactory or desired oral performance in the PhD viva could be achieved.

## **5.2 Identifying the Expectations of Performance**

From the analysis of the narratives, three aspects of the examiners' expectations of the candidate's oral performance emerged: i) the candidate's behaviour, ii) responses to the

examiners' questions and iii) display of doctoralness. Each of these aspects will be discussed in the following sections.

### **5.2.1 The candidate's behaviour**

The first aspect of examiner expectations is the behaviour of candidates. Almost all of the examiners expect candidates to display confident, interactional behaviours in the PhD viva except Cassie and Patrick. This expectation is illustrated by Alex, who mentions that:

Normally we look in terms of how confident the candidates to defend some of the facts that has been written and also presented during the viva. We have our judgement, initial judgement. But we just want to see something, something, more, more what, we want to see how confident the candidate to defend.

(Alex)

For Alex, confidence is demonstrated when candidates present their research and, later, when they discuss their work with the audience or answer questions that arise from the presentation. To achieve the examination purposes, confident candidate behaviour is expected in the oral examination. This demonstrates that the candidate did the research and possesses the ability to clarify obscurities and provide further information about the study under investigation (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004).

Although there is a need for candidates to display confidence in the viva, examiners (Sally, Lambert and Rebecca) do not expect candidates to be overly defensive in their behaviour. An example given by Rebecca, is that:

... the student becomes very defensive. You see if you're a good researcher, you're not defensive. You explain. You, you, you argue your case as a scholar. Okay. Defensive means you got nothing to hold on to and yet you are like, are like "No, you don't know that?" You see the student will say "No, you don't need that. I already read this one, you know?" I mean it's not very professional. You have to be professional scholar to answer like, like one only then you know...

(Rebecca)

Like most examiners, Rebecca expects a candidate to demonstrate reason by explaining or arguing in the viva and to behave in a scholarly manner. To Rebecca, overly defensive behaviour is when a candidate is unwilling to accept other suggestions and insists on making their point. When this happens, the possible effect could be to irritate the examiners and further lead to an unsatisfactory oral performance.

Conversely, candidates who are quiet in the oral examination are not preferred by the examiners. Examiners expect the candidates to not only present their research findings, but to also discuss them. Some examiners (Nancy, Thomas and Neil) encountered candidates who demonstrated quiet behaviour. For instance, Nancy states that:

I think we have the reverse problem, not that they are defensive or they are aggressive, you know, they are usually too quiet and giving short answers, and we have to keep asking 'Could you elaborate a little more?'

(Nancy)

Nancy provides a different scenario in the viva, in which the candidate remained silent in the oral examination as opposed to being defensive. This scenario is problematic, as the viva is a communication event that requires interactions and the exchange of research

ideas and thoughts (Murray, 2009). When the candidate is silent, the examiner needs to probe the candidate further to achieve the examination purposes.

### **5.2.2 Responses to the examiners' questions**

The second aspect of the examiner expectations is the responses given by candidates. Verbal responses from candidates are decisive in the oral examination; therefore, such responses need to be credible. Examiners (Sally, Hellen, Nancy and Rebecca) expect candidates to establish credibility by demonstrating expertise in the viva. Since candidates have worked on their research for a few years, they should have mastery over the subject and have developed a voice or opinion on the subject matter. For example, Hellen illustrates that:

What do I expect from a candidate? Number one... candidate should be able to show that he or she is the expert in that area. For every question that I raise, he or she has managed to convince me, right; this is the answer to the question and not looking to his or her supervisor. He's able to you know, to stand by his own, alright and give the answers to the questions by his own. This is one thing.

(Hellen)

When candidates answer examiners' questions in the oral examination, Hellen expects candidates to demonstrate that they are independent researchers who can exercise thinking skills drawing from the research they have conducted rather than relying on their supervisors. Her expectation is likely related to the goal of doctoral education — to anticipate PhD graduates who are capable of undertaking and disseminating research.

Once the credibility of the candidates has been established, their responses also need to be convincing. Most of the examiners expected candidates to convince them except Alex and Patrick. This is illustrated by Anabelle, who states that:

So once the technical aspect has been met, so I would say one-third or even 50% of your thesis is on the right direction. But, having said that, when the students are not able to convince us during the viva ... some get into trouble, yeah, and some just give up because of the situation, the tense situation...

(Anabelle)

For Anabelle, ensuring the thesis is sound is not the only important criterion. The candidate must provide convincing responses to the examiners' questions. Hence, the information provided by the candidate must be trustworthy.

When probed further on the notion of convincingness, most of the examiners (Rebecca, Nancy, Sally, Anabelle and Ruby) agreed that a key feature of being convincing was providing argumentative responses. Examiners expect the candidates to provide argumentative responses that are based on their research. As Rebecca states:

... I expect explanation [from the candidate]. Okay so in order to do this; this one will involve so and so so and so said like that. However because I need to, to see this group and the respondent therefore I have to choose this. Then there's another however, okay? However, because of this; there's another condition, then I have to use so and so. So therefore this framework becomes adapted to include dah dah dah. So, if you really did that framework, you really understand the theory involved and all that, you will answer like that..

(Rebecca)

For Rebecca, candidates are expected to explain how the study is conducted by providing arguments that are backed by reason and supported by evidence. Therefore, providing argumentative responses is one way to demonstrate convincingness.

### **5.2.3 Display of doctoralness**

Although doctoralness (doctoral quality) is the last category identified in the narratives of examiners, it is not the least important. Examiners (Thomas, Lambert, Rebecca, Hellen and Sally) expect candidates to demonstrate doctoralness in the oral examination. Since a defining characteristic of the PhD is contribution to knowledge, examiners generally expect the candidates to talk about the implications of the new knowledge arising from their research work and to reflect on their work. Lambert illustrates this through the following example:

When I look at the PhD, I'm always looking at the so what. Where's the contribution. The contribution does not have to be a contribution that's so huge that you're going to change the world. I'm always interested to know how the PhD has changed the student's own world.

(Lambert)

Lambert notes that candidates are expected to make their knowledge contribution explicit, as this is what examiners look for in the oral examination. However, he does not provide further information on how the student's world should have been changed as a result of doing a PhD.

Examiners are also interested in understanding candidates' thoughts on their research process and, particularly, their reflexivity, as this is an important part of undertaking a PhD.

Sally expresses that:

I really believe in asking students questions like what do they think are the strengths and the weaknesses of their own work? On hindsight, after you've submitted, you're more relaxed, you're sitting down, you're looking at your thesis, reading it like a storybook, you'll go like, 'Oh my god, I look at it and I said, why did I do it this way', right? And I'm very happy to, you know, to hear students say things like that, you know. 'I used this design but I can now say that there are shortcomings with this design. I'm not saying that the thesis is no good but I noticed the shortcomings of this design. Perhaps future research should look at a different design'. You know the candidate is aware of his own weaknesses that the thesis has this strength but at the same time the thesis has this weakness. You yourself are able to see it, you present it and for a person like me, I welcome that.

(Sally)

Sally is interested in the candidate's reflective thought after thesis submission. Often doing research is strenuous and a candidate might not have enough time to evaluate the research meticulously while writing the thesis. Thus, the viva provides a platform for such conversations to take place.

### **5.3 Discussion**

The previous section presented the expectations of examiners on candidate's performance in the PhD viva. Examiners expect confident, interactional behaviours, credible and convincing responses and a display of doctoralness. While the findings appear to be

useful for examiners and candidates, they have raised further questions: *Which expectation is emphasised by the examiners? What oral performance is regarded as desirable and what is regarded as undesirable? Why do examiners have such expectations?*

Of the three expectations, credible and convincing responses were emphasised by the examiners as the most crucial aspect in the viva. Examiners also expect candidates to provide argumentative responses. This means that candidates' responses should be carefully considered, crafted and supported by evidence. For further illustration, Murray (2009) asserts the viva is a communication event in which the exchange of views is expected, but should be supported by existing studies. In addition, examiners' questions are sometimes meant to be critical and challenging. Therefore, it is fine if the candidates do not have the answers to all the questions. However, candidates are expected to answer what they know and tell the examiners directly if they do not have the answers (Chen, 2014).

Through identifying the expectations of examiners, the characteristics of a desirable oral performance were elicited. These include interactive behaviours, credible and convincing argumentative responses and doctoralness through the ability to discuss the implications of the study as well as the reflexivity. Conversely, the characteristics of undesired performance were also apparent. These include extremely quiet behaviour or overly defensive behaviour.

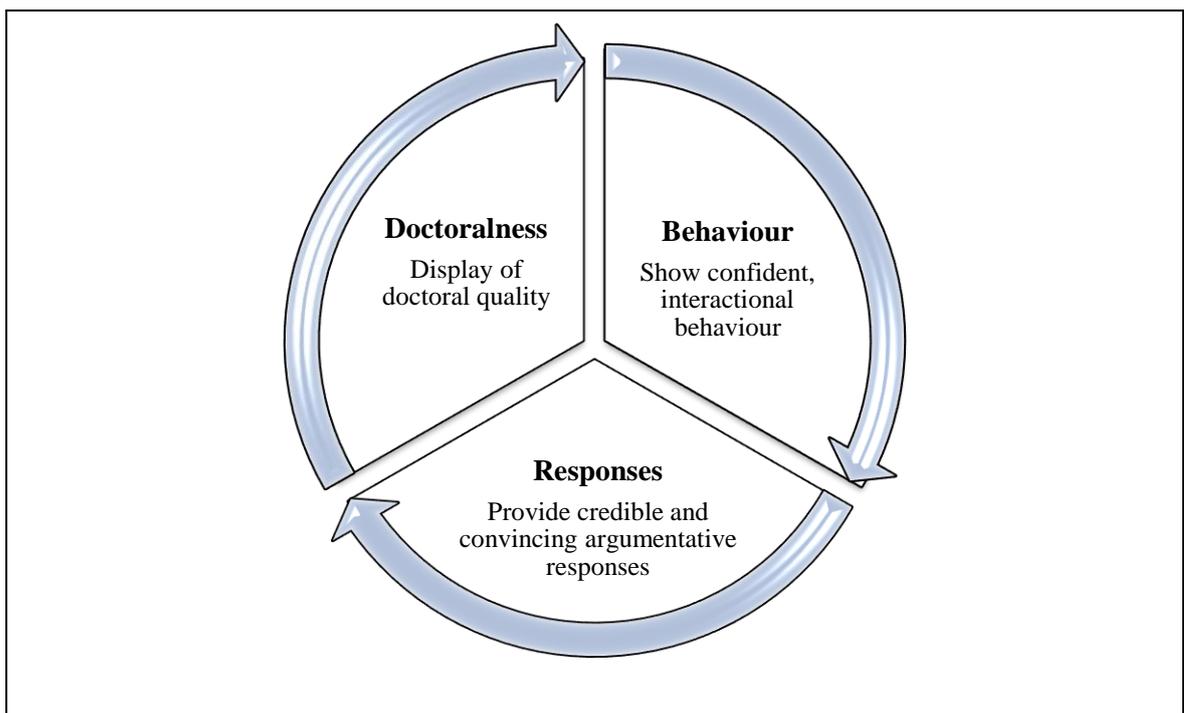
The reason for having such expectations is largely because the examiners expect to see a scholar who can interact and argue about research in the oral examination. The expectations of examiners are imperative in the PhD viva, as they influence the process of

the assessment. Although the main purpose of the viva is examination, examiners expect the candidate to successfully engage in the PhD viva. This finding reinforces the role of the viva as a space for communicating research, much like conferences and seminars.

The findings in this chapter imply that knowing the expectations of examiners would raise awareness for both examiners and candidates. For novice examiners, understanding the expectations would provide them the knowledge of community of practice and guide them on what to expect in the viva. Currently, there is limited insight on the criteria on how examiners assess candidates, form an impression or make a decision in the PhD viva. As for candidates, the findings could be a guide for their PhD viva preparation. For example, they could prepare themselves for the viva by presenting in conferences as well as becoming involved in research discussion and teaching others.

Having an insight on what is expected of examiners in the PhD viva in regard to the candidate's oral performance adds to our understanding of the examining practices of the PhD viva and how examiners base their decisions in MY university. Despite the limited nature of the study (e.g. limited participants and sites), this chapter provides an avenue for further research. Future work is required in exploring how the expectations of examiners are met by the candidate in the viva. Observations of the viva in progress would be ideal. Research could draw on the theory and methodology from the field of linguistics to deepen our understanding of examiner practices, particularly the interactions in the ongoing viva, as well as provide direction in guiding examiner training and viva practices.

Nevertheless, the findings enrich our understanding about examiners' expectations in the PhD viva. These expectations are the characteristics of a scholar and are a decisive factor in the examiners' decision in the doctoral assessment in which this idea is worth exploring further. A conceptual model of the examiner expectations of the students's performance in the viva, as derived from the findings of the study, is shown in Figure 5. The model has the potential to provide a guide to candidates on the expected performance in the viva and to examiners on what to look for in a candidate. However, further testing and expansion of the model will be required in order to create a performance checklist which is beyond the scope of the current study.



**Figure 5.** A conceptual model of the expectations of the candidate's performance in the PhD viva

I return to the story about Nurul, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Although Nurul sat the viva again and passed the assessment, if she was advised of the performance expectations of the examiners as reported in this chapter, perhaps she would have passed the viva in her first attempt.

## **5.4 Summary**

Examiners have revealed their expectations of the candidate's oral performance and how essential such expectations of behaviours and responses, as well as doctoralness, are to the success of the candidate in defending the PhD viva. These aspects of the candidate's performance are also essential when researchers communicate their research. The viva, apart from its examination nature, is a platform for such conversation to take place. Wherever possible, examiners and candidates, as well as the doctoral community, should be made aware of these expectations.

In the next chapter, I attempt to discover how examiners develop their practices by studying how they learn to examine in the PhD viva and the associated challenges.

## **Chapter Six: Finding III.**

### **Learning to Examine and the Challenges in the PhD Viva**

In this chapter, I explore the narratives of examiners on the learning aspects of the PhD viva and the possible challenges faced during the examination. I aim to answer the third and fourth sub-research questions of the study: *How do examiners learn to examine in the PhD viva? What are some of the examination challenges encountered by the examiners?* It should be recalled that examiners play a significant role in the doctoral assessment, yet their practices in the PhD viva are poorly understood. Studies of the doctoral assessment, and the viva particularly, tend to focus on student preparation for the viva, rarely addressing how to prepare examiners for the event. There is a need to make known the learning and assessment experiences of examiners in the PhD viva, to enhance understanding of these issues, and improve their preparation and practice.

From my interviews with the examiners, I reveal that the examiners learned to examine in the viva by drawing mainly on their own postgraduate experiences, and through a process of trial and error. Despite the significance of the PhD viva for doctoral assessment, examiners rarely receive any institutional training on how to examine. I also found that examiners faced challenges related to interactions with the candidates and conflicts between examiners. The findings from the examiners' narratives highlight several important problems and a strong need for improved developmental training support for examiners. I identify some developmental needs and suggest possible solutions of interest to academic developers and universities regarding how examiners can be supported to ensure effective

practices in the viva, with an ultimate aim of contributing to a better doctoral assessment regime.

## 6.1 Introduction

Examiners are key participants in ensuring the success of doctoral assessment. However, how examiners experience the PhD viva and gain knowledge and skills to examine remains an underexplored area. A review of studies on doctoral assessment and examiner experiences over the past two decades found that there was almost no empirical research on examiner learning or preparing examiners to examine, particularly in the PhD viva (see Chapter Two). Existing studies have focused on the purposes of the oral examination (Jackson & Tinkler, 2001; Kelly, 2010) and, overwhelmingly, on preparing students for the viva (e.g. Murray, 2009; Smith, 2014; Trafford & Leshlem, 2008; Wellington, 2010). While the findings and recommendations from these studies can inform examiner learning to some extent, a targeted study on examiner experiences and preparing examiners for the viva was lacking.

Nevertheless, it was found that examiners who are involved in the doctoral assessment can draw on two remarkable how-to guidebooks to understand how other examiners examine and guide their examining practices of the PhD viva. The first book is Tinkler and Jackson's (2004) *The doctoral examination: A handbook for students, examiners and supervisors*. This book is largely based on the researchers' experience and empirical research conducted in 1999 to 2003, comprising policy data from 20 UK universities and a survey with approximately 350 examiners, supervisors and candidates. The authors discussed various topics in their book such as defining the viva and explaining the viva

process within the UK context. The handbook is a useful resource, as it provides insights into the viva process and how it is conducted; however, despite its title positioning the book as a preparation guide, it does not provide a critical discussion of examiner practices or learning experiences.

A second valuable resource for doctoral examiners is Pearce's (2005) *How to examine a thesis*. She focused on examining a thesis as well as preparing for and examining in the viva. She provided insights on being a viva examiner and some practical advice on examining, and compared regulations and examination practices in different countries. Though the advice given by the researcher was mostly based on personal experience rather than extensive research, the book is valuable for novice examiners in the UK due to its prescriptive nature. Taken together, these two guidebooks are the most prominent resources that researchers and academics can find to draw on in relation to doctoral assessment or the PhD viva. With the expansion of doctoral education, the ideas in these books need to be re-examined to cater for their relevance to the Malaysian context.

Besides accessing the two how-to guidebooks and numerous studies on preparing students for the oral examination, most of the examiners did not seem to have viva-related learning opportunities. They received little or no institutional training on how to examine in the PhD viva. A survey of the professional development programs in universities of different geographical areas showed that the training for examiners was insufficient or completely lacking. Certainly, many universities have started to provide continuous professional development programs to support academics. However, many of these programs relate to supervision matters. Examples include the two-day supervisor development program at the

University of Otago, NZ (University of Otago, n.d.-a), the four-day course on supervision at Stockholm University, Sweden (Stockholm University, n.d.), the seminar on supervising DPhil students at the University of Oxford, UK (University of Oxford, n.d.), and the two-half day workshops on supervision and examination at MY university. Such professional development programs are beneficial for academics and supervisors because they allow supervision practices to be shared among supervisors across disciplines within the university.

Even though assessment is often one of the topics of discussion in the professional development programs for supervisors, the focus is presumably on the supervision process and on preparing students for the assessment. It seems lesser attention has been given in the training programs to preparing examiners to undertake the assessment. However, there is an emerging trend of professional development programs covering the topic of thesis examination. For instance, a workshop on examining a thesis is offered by the University of Otago (University of Otago, n.d.-b). Yet, examples of training for examiners specifically for the PhD viva were rarely found.

In view of the limited knowledge on the learning experiences and preparation of examiners, developing an understanding of how examiners master the skills of examining is indispensable. The insights obtained from examiners could inform the design of professional learning programs, as there seems to be a lack of formal training for examiners in most universities. Academic developers will be able to draw on the knowledge of the examiners, select the skills and strategies that are essential to viva assessment and advise potential examiners on these. This knowledge could then be applied by these examiners to the

examination, improving their competency in achieving the examination's desired outcome. Since preparing examiners for the assessment is as important as preparing them for supervision, analysing the examiners' narratives of experience to gain insight into how examiners learn to examine is a crucial first step.

In this chapter, I discuss how examiners learned to examine in the PhD viva and the challenges they faced during the examination at MY university. To gain better insights into examiner experiences, this chapter offers narrative accounts which have rarely been documented in the doctoral assessment literature. The purpose of providing these accounts is not just to discuss how examiners learn to examine and its challenges, but also to ascertain if there is a need to support examiners and their practices in the assessment.

## **6.2 Recognising the Learning Experiences to Examine**

Identifying and understanding how examiners learn how to examine in the viva is a critical step in supporting their practice. Two themes emerged from the examiner narratives: (1) learning from their own postgraduate experiences and (2) learning from examining. Each of these themes will be discussed in the following sections.

### **6.2.1 Learning from their own postgraduate experience**

Examiners learned to examine in the viva mainly by drawing on their own postgraduate experiences. Almost all the examiners who were interviewed, except for Alex, expressed that their assessment practices were based on their personal viva experience. When defending their own doctoral theses in the PhD viva, the examiners formed an impression of the viva process, which they relied on when they examined. Hellen, when asked whether she had received any form of training in examining, said that:

No no. No training at all. [I learnt] from my own experience. How viva is being conducted and what are the questions that they ask, how I answered the questions, how I convinced people, and then [I examine] through experience.

(Hellen)

For Hellen, she learned from her own personal encounter when she took part in the viva. Her understanding of the viva was shaped by her contact with her examiners. She became aware of what to do in, and how to examine, the viva through her exposure to the viva questions and acceptable responses.

Apart from learning through postgraduate experience, two examiners, Neil and Sally, took the initiative to learn more about examining. They developed their examining knowledge and skills through reading. For example, Sally commented that:

...I think I learned a lot by reading. I teach research methods. I evaluate students' proposals. I read about being an examiner. I think University of Lancaster had started work on training examiners for the viva process and I remember reading it. Very interesting....

(Sally)

Sally explained that her learning of being an examiner was not just derived from her role as an academic who teaches research, but was also informed by research and an awareness of other institutional practices. The way Sally learned shows her continuous effort in sharpening her examination skills.

### 6.2.2 Learning from examining

The examiners also learned to examine from being directly involved in the PhD viva. One-third of the examiners (Sally, Nancy, Cassie, Neil and Patrick) mentioned that they learned to examine in the viva from observing other examiners. A common example shared by the examiners is that:

There is no formal training, it's just learning on the job... we observe how other people do it [in the viva], and then refer to our own experience... that's all. No formal training actually...

(Nancy)

Nancy pointed out that learning took place when she observed others in the PhD viva. She became aware of how other examiners examined and adopted their practices. When subsequently appointed to examine, she would recall her past experiences to guide her practice. In addition to Nancy's view, Neil revealed that examiners did not receive any formal institutional training to examine in the viva because no such training exists at the university level. Professional development for doctoral examiners and supervisors at MY University is still in its infancy, which explains why Nancy's and Neil's responses were echoed by the other examiners.

Despite formal institutional training not being mentioned, two examiners (Cassie and Patrick) brought up that some form of on-the-job training does take place at the faculty or departmental level. It appeared to be common practice for some departments to require examiners to fulfil two criteria before being allowed to take up an examiner role at the doctoral level. These criteria were: 1) chairing a viva session and 2) supervising

postgraduates at the masters and doctoral levels. One examiner, Cassie, for instance, noted that a novice examiner will be appointed as a chairperson for the viva in the first place:

No. I think ... they don't have this kind of training. They just, normally, what we did in our faculty is we will give the new person to become the Chairman first. So, that there is on the job training. You see the real viva and you see how the question and answer taking place. So, that is the training... It's not you go there to hear some kind of lecture. It's not like that.

(Cassie)

Here Cassie reiterated that formal institutional training to become an examiner does not occur. Rather, examiners learn from their involvement.

Other examiners confirmed that an examiner must have been a supervisor at the masters and doctoral levels. An eligible examiner is one who has supervised a postgraduate to graduation as indicated in the appointment criteria for examiners at MY University. An illustration given by Patrick is that:

No, I'm not [trained]. But there is a requirement. In order to be appointed as an examiner of the viva, there are some requirements. Number one, that examiner must at least sit in a PhD or a Masters level supervisory committee for at least three semesters.

(Patrick)

According to Patrick, the rules for appointment of examiners are firm. Academics are expected to have supervised postgraduates before being appointed as examiners.

Further, a number of examiners (Annabelle, Ruby, Thomas and Lambert) mentioned that they learned how to examine through experience. One examiner, Annabelle, explained that:

[Examining in the viva] is a trial and error for me. I don't know whether I've done any damage [to the students] or not. I don't know whether I'm the only one or what... So to me, no training. Trial and error. Blunder myself. I pray every night I say I hope I have not hurt poor students' feelings or spoiled their future.

(Annabelle)

Annabelle's narrative illustrates her uncertainty about the effect on the students of her examining practice. She hoped that her practice was fair to the students and did not cause negative emotions for them.

Overall, examiners learned to examine in the viva mainly through personal experience, learning from their postgraduate experiences and learning from examining. They did not receive any formal training before embarking on the examining task. The experience-based nature of most of the examiners' knowledge prompted examination of the tensions and challenges that they encountered in the PhD viva.

## **6.3 Identifying the Tensions and Challenges of Examiners in the Oral Examination**

A closer look at the examiners' narratives showed that examining in the viva was not without tensions and challenges. Examiners encountered some tensions related to 1) examining with other examiners, 2) examining the PhD candidates and 3) reaching a final consensus in the viva. Each of these tensions will be discussed in the following sections.

### **6.3.1 Examining with other examiners**

While examining with other examiners, power plays were common. Examiners narrated several instances in which examiners with senior ranking tended to influence the conduct and decision of the viva. For instance, Alex asserted that:

Sometimes one examiner dominates the meeting. Alright. They want that all the examiner to follow his decision. It depends sometimes, it depends. If he, he or she was the senior professor, of course very difficult for the young examiners ok to go against the decision by the senior professor.

(Alex)

As demonstrated by Alex, examiners might use their position of power in an abusive way. Whether the examiners are right in their judgement, such practices may be perceived as controversial.

Also, some examiners exercised their power in an inappropriate way when meeting the candidate. An illustration by Annabelle is that:

There's so many wrongdoing or wrong things, so unfortunately, these lecturers or examiners will tend to be waiting to pounce upon you [the candidate] on the wrong move during your [the candidate's] viva.

(Annabelle)

Annabelle recalled her earlier experience as a novice examiner. She noted that she had seen malpractice in the viva in terms of how other examiners examined unfairly or destructively. For example, instead of helping the candidates to improve on their research, examiners would try to find fault with the candidates, even though this may be regarded by some examiners as part of the test. Consequently, the candidates had a hard time in the viva often because of the difficult examiners.

### **6.3.2 Examining the candidates**

Examiners were also confronted with PhD candidates who did not behave in a way considered acceptable during their meeting in the PhD viva. For example, the examiners described instances of defensive behaviour from the candidates. This is exemplified by Cassie:

... the candidate cried, the candidate become defensive, he or she question us, "Why? What is wrong with my work, this is, this is the best I can do, there is no other way", even though we say that, "Yeah, there is other way. You should look into this and that" and she, he or she say that, "I don't want to do other way. This is what I like", so there is the challenge.

(Cassie)

Another example of defensiveness from candidates was given by Sally:

... they argue with you when you tell them that, you know, perhaps what we say something like you should have used this design instead of this design, they will argue with you until the cows come home and they won't leave you... Three people can say the same thing and they'll still argue with you and say, no, they're right, refusing to see what the examiners are trying to say... refusing to accept that we, the examiners, have found some discrepancies in the work. Yes, it really occurs mainly with foreign students.

(Sally)

In contrast, examiners sometimes encountered PhD candidates who were reserved.

An illustration by Nancy is that:

I think we have the, the, the reverse problem, not that they are, they are defensive or they are aggressive, you know, they are usually too quiet and giving short answers, and we have to keep asking 'Could you elaborate a little more?'

(Nancy)

Based on the narratives of Cassie and Sally, even though the candidates were expected to defend their research in the viva, over-defending could have an opposite effect and irritate the examiners. The act of over-defending was viewed as unacceptable behaviour by the examiners. On the other hand, Nancy observed that if the candidates were quiet, examiners would have to pose more questions to elicit responses from these candidates. This suggests that handling candidates who refuse to listen and engage or are quiet requires appropriate examination skills and strategies to achieve the purposes of the viva.

### 6.3.3 Reaching final consensus in the viva

The final tension as mentioned by the examiners related to making decision about the assessment. Whether to award a pass, fail or re-viva after the viva involves the examination committee's consensus facilitated by the chair. Reaching a final unanimous consensus is often not an easy task. Examiners have differing opinions about the results, and this poses a challenge. Alex illustrates that:

Sometimes the challenge is we take long time to arrive to a common conclusion. I think [this is a] common problem to all the examiners. Sometimes one examiner dominates the meeting and want all the examiner to follow his decision... If he or she was a senior professor, of course [it is] very difficult for the young examiners to [go] against the decision [made] by the senior professor [or] prestigious and well-known professor. We always listen [to] their decision [as it is] influential in the final decision.

(Alex)

Another dilemma is whose decision should be listened to, external examiners or internal examiners? Whether the remark made by the external examiners carries more weight than the internal examiners, or the other way around, is open for debate. Internal examiners, as the gatekeepers for institutions, could have the definitive say. For instance, Nancy stated:

There was one occasion; the external examiner was determined to fail the student. And the 2 internal examiners did not think that the student deserve a fail, but resubmission, yes, you know, so it was a very difficult situation. So at the end we called for a vote, and because we have two internal examiner, yeah, and only one external examiner, so the external examiner was outvoted, because of that, you know, he was very unhappy, so I think it has damaged the relationship.

(Nancy)

Another example mentioned by Rebecca concerns the amount of power internal examiners have:

They [Internal examiners] failed the students because the examiner, the external is not counted. You can imagine, you can imagine they said "Please discount all the comments from the external examiner".

(Rebecca)

Nancy and Rebecca explained that there exist tensions in making decisions about whether a candidate should pass or fail. There might not be an easy solution to this tension, as both the internal and external examiners might have dissimilar perspectives, requiring intervention from the chairperson of the viva.

## **6.4 Discussion**

The aim of this chapter was to discover how examiners learn to examine in the PhD viva and the challenges they encounter during the oral examination. I scrutinised the narratives of the examiners on their learning experiences relating to the oral examination. The first finding was that examiners learn to examine based on their own experiences. Often, they see and reflect on how other examiners examine and play their examiner role in the viva, using this to decide which practices to follow and which to avoid. Examiners also recall their own viva experiences from when they were doctoral candidates. If their viva experiences were pleasant, they are likely to repeat these practices when they examine their next viva.

The finding that examiners learn from their own postgraduate experience or experiential learning is not surprising; it resonates with Wisker and Kiley's (2014) study on

learning lessons from doctoral examinations. These researchers analysed survey results and interview findings from a cohort of examiners and students in Australia and the UK on the issue of learning. They argued that the lessons learned in the written thesis assessment could benefit supervisory practices, which ultimately could support thesis students better. Further, they too found that examiners received no formal training to be an examiner. The current study substantiates Wisker and Kiley's research claim.

Another way examiners learn to examine is by taking part in the viva. The notion of learning on the job is one such example evident in my study. In addition to drawing from their experience as postgraduates, examiners observe how other examiners play their examiner role and interact with the candidates in the viva. From this, examiners learn the required processes and the expectations of them in the viva.

A possible explanation of the way examiners learned to examine in the viva is by using reflective practice. Reflective practice is the process of learning through and from experience towards gaining new insights of self and/or practice (Boud et al., 1985; Boyd & Fales, 1983; Jarvis, 1992; Mezirow, 1981). As evident in the examiners' narratives, they learned from their own and by observing others' experiences. However, experiences do not necessarily lead to learning without deliberate reflection to enhance expertise (Gibbs, 1988). Thus, examiners are in fact learning from reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). Reflection-in-action is the immediate thought one has when involved in a situation. For example, examiners rephrased the viva question if they felt that the candidate was not understanding it. In contrast, reflection-on-action takes place later, when one recollects the thinking, feeling and doing of the event (Schön, 1983). For instance, examiners

modified their examining approaches in the next viva if they thought their current approaches were not effective enough.

Reflective practice is important for examiners. First, examiners are responsible to the university that appointed them. They need to ensure their knowledge, skills and behaviour in examining can achieve the goals of the doctoral assessment. Second, reflective practice is essential for the learning of competent practice, requiring examiners to reflect on their strengths and areas of opportunity for development. Through reflection, examiners could make their practice visible and review its effectiveness, and ultimately becoming more competent as examiners.

However, how examiners learned to examine in the viva appeared inadequate. Two questions are worth asking. Firstly, how do we know whether the examiners' reflections lead to effective assessment in the viva? There is limited access to the closed-door viva, and examiners are often not monitored or trained to carry out their task. The chairperson of the viva may be expected to moderate the session, but how well do we know the actual practice since the chairperson also has not received any formal training, and some are new to the assessment process. Secondly, how do we know whether the reflections of examiners are a good representation of examiner practice? These questions deserve follow-up study, which is beyond the current study.

A second finding of the chapter is that examiners faced conflict and tensions in interactions during the viva. In some instances, examiners reported their co-examiners in the viva trying to find fault with the candidates. The lack of clarity around effective practice for

examining in the viva may contribute to this. If examiners are equipped with knowledge on what constitutes effective examining practices, malpractice could be prevented. Also, some examiners recalled the need to manage PhD candidates who had become defensive or who were very reserved, which affected the dynamics and outcome of the viva. Two questions worth asking are, what does a good defence look like? And where should candidates draw the line between defence and defensive?

Other issues that examiners found challenging in the viva related to the disparity in practice and power dynamics among the examination committee and the convenor while examining or making a final decision in the viva. Similar issues were reported by Pearce (2005), who provided narratives of power plays by examiners who were more powerful and who expected the other examiners to agree to make a pass decision. The politics of examiners is likely to affect the viva process and negatively impact the assessment.

Examining in the viva is not an individual task; it involves interacting and decision making with other examiners and candidates. Examiners should therefore consider the ways in which they examine and interact with the other parties in the event. I propose that they can achieve this goal if they share and review their practices within a community of practice. Further, examiners should attend professional development training to learn how to examine effectively. This suggests a need to enhance support for examiners in the viva.

At MY University, training for academics on aspects of doctoral education has recently begun. The training mainly focusses on matters related to supervision—for example, how to supervise effectively and how to ensure timely graduation—with minimal

attention dedicated to examining the PhD. This situation is apparent in other doctoral education contexts, including New Zealand. To ensure effective assessment, the whole doctoral community, particularly examiners of the PhD viva, need to be equipped with the appropriate examining knowledge and skills.

Support focussing on examining knowledge and skills should therefore be provided to examiners. It is suggested that universities and academic developers include the following when designing this support:

- identify the training needs of examiners
- encourage examiners to reflect on their practice and enhance it, if necessary
- encourage examiners to share their practice with others
- monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the training
- provide ongoing accessible support systems to enable effective learning and assessment
- conduct research to identify best practice for the PhD viva.

The outcome of the support should be that attendees of the training programs can demonstrate not just competency in assessment but also effective practices in examination at the university level. The support should be added to the professional development for academics, as has been done with the supervisor training program. Such support could be provided by individual universities or by the quality control agency of the country, such as the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA), in Malaysia; the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA), in New Zealand; and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher

Education (QAA), in the UK. Effective support would not only enhance examiner practices in the PhD viva, but could also feed back to supervision and further strengthen the research discourse community.

## **6.5 Summary**

This chapter adds to the doctoral assessment literature on examiner experiences, particularly on how examiners learn to examine in the PhD viva. Examiners mostly learned from their experiences and through trial and error. They received little institutional training to examine. This chapter raises concerns about the lack of examiner preparation. Further, the finding of many examiners experience challenges when examining in the viva could negatively affect the students, the assessment outcome and thus the development of effective practice deserves serious attention. In concluding this chapter, I highlighted the need to educate examiners, and argued that examiners should reflect on or relearn their practices for examining in the PhD viva if necessary. Examiners should receive institutional training to achieve and maintain competency and effectiveness in the context of expanding doctoral education.

In the next chapter, to close the training gap identified in this chapter, I propose a provisional framework for supporting examiners, drawing from my discussions and reflections thus far.

## **Chapter Seven: Discussion.**

### **Supporting Examiners in Developing Effective Practices in the PhD Viva**

In this chapter, I discuss three training initiatives for supporting examiners in assessing the PhD viva: a professional development program (PDP), a peer review of the viva and an accreditation program. These initiatives respond to the fifth sub-research question of the study: *How should examiners and their practices in the PhD viva be supported by the university towards effective assessment?* Answering this question also supports the second purpose of the study, which is to equip examiners with the necessary PhD examination knowledge and skills, particularly for the oral examination, and to address the challenges of examining and gaps in the training of examiners for the PhD viva identified in Chapter Six. These proposed initiatives are the outcome of my reflections as researcher and together offer a provisional framework for examiner education and training for universities, particularly at MY University. This chapter also discusses the barriers facing implementation of the initiatives, as well as the need for their further evaluation.

## 7.1 Introduction

Universities are responsible for ensuring the doctoral programs and assessments offered are of such a quality that the qualification is accepted worldwide. To ensure the standards of the PhD are met, universities employ various quality assurance mechanisms, such as appointing examiners external to the university to conduct the assessment (Kiley, 2009a) alongside internal examiners. In so doing, the PhD granted by the university is an international recognition of the student's ability to conduct research (Park, 2005). It also means the PhD research has been peer reviewed by members of the academic community. Given the importance of quality assurance, in addition to appointing external examiners, universities should be accountable for providing examiner education.

Examiner education is defined as training to become an examiner and entails equipping academics with the knowledge and skills required to conduct doctoral assessment at a university. This definition derives from the idea of teacher education (Korthagen et al., 2008). Examiner education is essential in supporting doctoral examiners for the assessment in two ways, with the first relating to knowing and the second relating to practice. First, examiners need to know the examining knowledge and skills expected of them. Examiners also need to be familiar with different examiner practices because in addition to being appointed to examine PhDs in their specialisation or specific discipline, examiners are sometimes appointed to examine PhDs of topics from other disciplines or across disciplines. Thus, having a broad view of the community of examiner practice is crucial to strengthening examining knowledge and skills at universities.

Second, examiners at universities must be able to examine the PhD in accordance with university policy. This is essential, especially for novice examiners; it ensures standardised examining practices and that thesis and viva assessments are consistent across universities. Examiners must also be able to reflect on their practice while also learning from others, and they should learn effective examining strategies to avoid potential pitfalls in the PhD examination. Therefore, having preparation programs and training for examiners is important to prepare potential examiners to meet the professional and personality requirements for PhD assessment (Kiley, 2009b).

In practice, examiner education is lacking at universities. This is not surprising, as research attention has only recently been directed towards doctoral assessment and examiner training. Existing PDPs focus mostly on supervision (see Kiley, 2011, McCulloch & Loeser, 2016), with little attention devoted to assessment. However, the beginnings of training programs for examiners can now be found in some universities. For example, the University of Liverpool offers a training session for internal examiners, which aims to equip examiners with knowledge of the doctoral policy and practice of examination at the university (University of Liverpool, n.d.). Despite some evidence of training programs for examiners, programs aimed at preparing examiners for the viva are scarce.

Another reason for the lack of examiner education is the limited number of studies of doctoral assessment, which prevents the dissemination of research-informed examining practices. Of the two parts of the doctoral assessment, the thesis examination has the widest research coverage informing training. Researchers have examined a myriad of topics related to thesis examination practices that have training implications for examiners (e.g., Holbrook,

et al., 2007; Kiley & Mullins, 2004; Mullins & Kiley, 2002). By way of illustration, one exemplary study is Mullins and Kiley's (2002) '“It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize”: How experienced examiners assess research theses'. In their article, the researchers interviewed 30 experienced examiners from five universities on how they examine written theses. The researchers identified the examining criteria used and the experiences of examiners in relation to thesis examination. Their study, along with other studies on thesis examination practices (e.g. Bourke & Holbrook, 2013; Holbrook et al., 2004), shows that identifying the process of thesis examination could educate examiners, supervisors and students. However, Mullins and Kiley's study also points to the need for training programs to equip examiners with the necessary skills; the researchers ended their study with a call for a formal mentoring program to guide examiners on examining theses.

In contrast to studies on the written examination, empirical studies on the oral examination are limited, making the training for examiners on the PhD viva inadequate. The closed-door nature of the PhD viva has prevented public access, and first-hand research on examiner practices in the oral examination is nearly impossible (Wallace, 2003). For that reason, studies are needed to inform training.

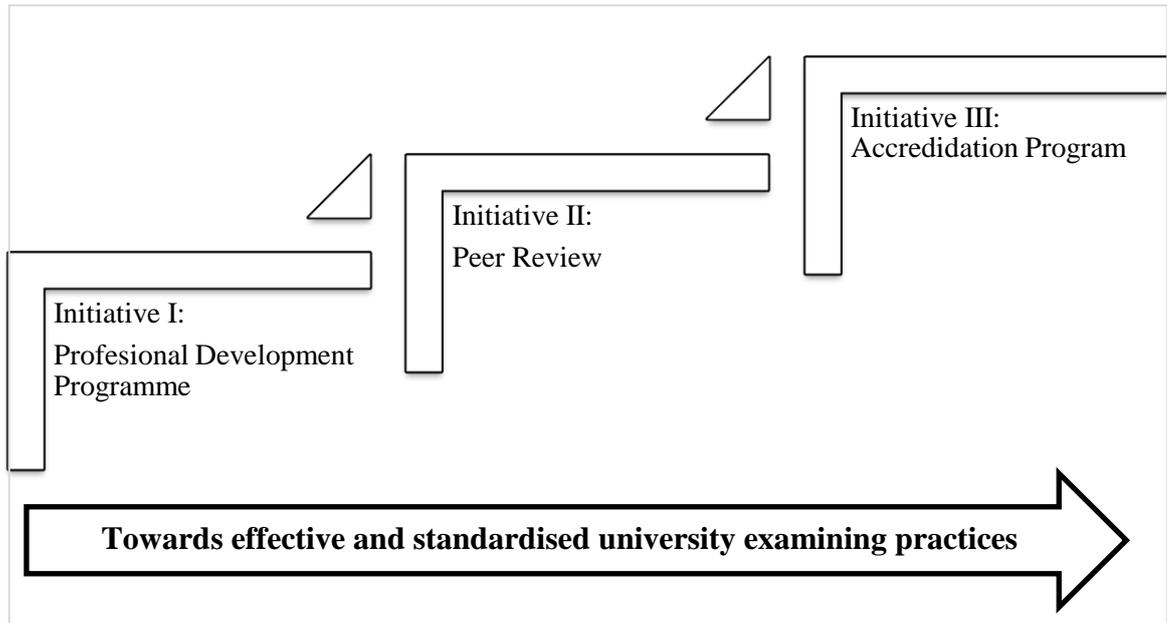
In view of the lack of examiner training in doctoral assessment and its significance (see Chapter Six), in this chapter I propose three initiatives to support examiners to improve their practice of the PhD viva: a PDP, a peer review of the viva and an accreditation program. Together, these three initiatives offer a provisional framework for examiner education. These initiatives derive from my reflections on the study thus far, with their design informed by my constructivist experience and current learning support initiatives in higher education.

## 7.2 Initiatives for Examiner Training

Three initiatives are proposed to support examiners: a PDP, a peer review of the viva and an accreditation program. These initiatives:

- provide a platform for conversation
- encourage examiners to learn, reflect on their practice and enhance it, if necessary
- encourage examiners to share their practice with others
- provide ongoing accessible institutional support systems to enable effective learning and assessment.

When the three initiatives are implemented together, they form a provisional framework that could be used by universities to support examiners and their examining practices (see Figure 6). The framework could be included in examiner education either as an informal, non-structured support, or as a formal, structured support, provided it achieves the aim of supporting examiners for the doctoral assessment. Each of the initiatives are explained below.



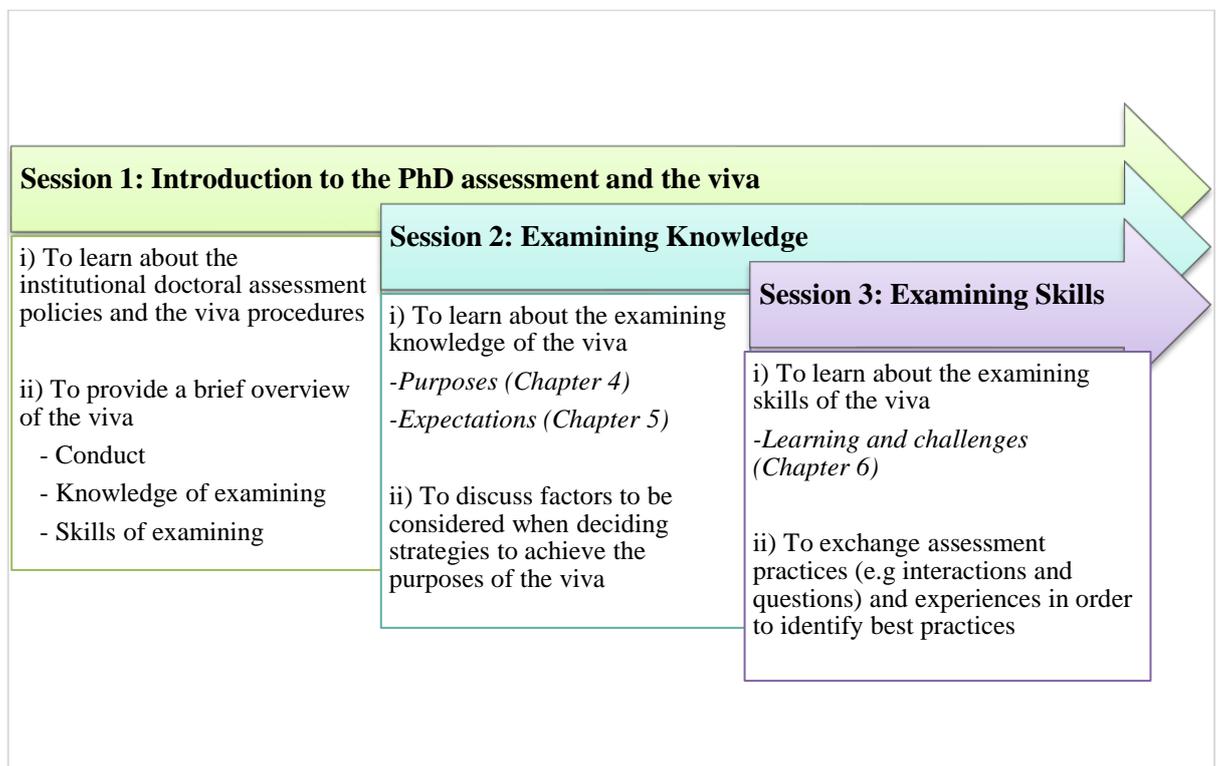
**Figure 6.** A provisional framework in supporting examiners

### **7.2.1 Initiative I: Professional development program**

A PDP focussing on the viva should be offered. PDPs are designed to target learners on particular topics and are facilitated in some way and have the aim of fostering learning (Borko, 2004). Current PDPs for academics tend to focus on how to examine a thesis rather than on how to examine in the viva. As the viva is an essential part of the doctoral assessment, training specific to the viva is indispensable.

Drawing on existing PDP for doctoral supervision, a similar training program could be developed for the viva. One example of a training program is the three-session lunchtime seminars on supervision offered by the University of Bristol in the UK (University of Bristol, 2015), which focuses on institutional policies and supervisor experiences and is facilitated by an academic developer. This program aims to support academics who want to learn the art of supervision but who have limited time due to a hectic workload. This training model is useful for adaptation for examiners of the viva. Figure 7 illustrates a three-session PDP

that emphasises institutional policies and examiner practices and experiences, and incorporates the findings of this study. This PDP could be conducted face-to-face or online, facilitated by academic developers. It has the benefit of supporting a research discourse community of examiner practice.



**Figure 7.** A PDP for examiners who examine in the viva

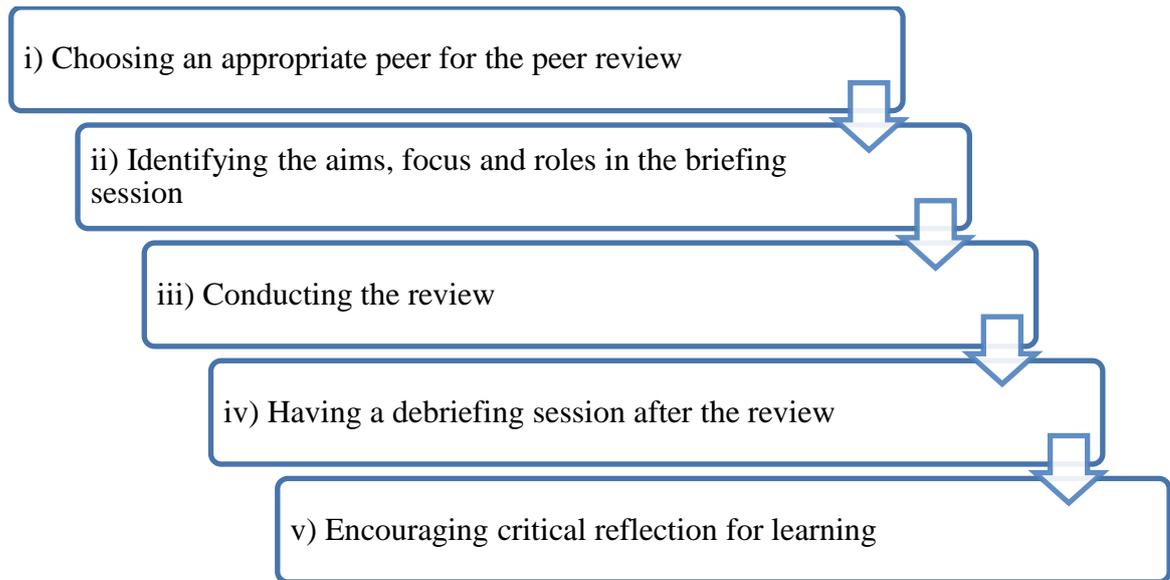
Potential and newly appointed examiners would be expected to attend the three sessions of the PDP to familiarise themselves with the PhD viva at the university. They would be introduced to the university’s doctoral assessment and oral examination policy and gain the knowledge and skills to examine. The knowledge basis of the PDP could be informed by the findings in the current study, supported further by existing literature and complemented by examiners’ experience sharing. The three sessions of the PDP could also be offered as an intensive one-day training. Regardless of delivery mode, the learning

outcome would be to ensure examiners have a clearer view of the institutional policy and practices of the doctoral assessment expected of them at the university.

### **7.2.2 Initiative II: Peer review**

Peer review should be introduced to examiners of the PhD viva. Peer review is ‘a purposeful, non-judgemental, collaborative process whereby a colleague, or peer, is invited to observe a selected aspect/s of another’s teaching and provide constructive feedback on its effectiveness in promoting student learning’ (‘Peer Review of Teaching’, 2015, p. 1). Though the intention of peer review is to help academics to review and enhance their teaching practice, it can also be adapted to be a tool for professional learning and can help academics in the oral examination.

There are various ways to conduct peer review. This study suggests learning from the peer review of teaching/supervision model, initiated at the University of Otago, New Zealand. This is a voluntary academic activity that takes place among colleagues for the purpose of learning. Figure 8 outlines a five-step program for peer review, following the peer review of teaching/supervision model:



**Figure 8.** A peer review model for teaching (University of Otago, n.d.-c)

The peer review shown in Figure 8 is a learning activity that could be used as part of a mentoring program, with experienced academics guiding less experience academics. Academics who are experienced examiners in the department, faculty, division or university could be selected as the mentor to assist novice examiners, such as by providing feedback on their examining practices. The review might involve a discussion session or observation of the examiner during the viva followed by a discussion. Less experienced examiners would discuss their practice with experienced colleagues to learn how to examine better in the viva, drawing on their reflections from the peer review. Examiners could also exchange their viva experiences with colleagues to help them to identify good practices. This sharing of practice among examiners would foster more effective examining practice with an aim to encourage student learning in the oral examination (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004).

### **7.2.3 Initiative III: Accreditation program**

An accreditation program for examiners could be implemented by the university. ‘Accreditation’ refers to the process of training, monitoring and certifying an academic to carry out an assessment. Since a PhD has global recognition, and the viva is a high-stake examination, examiners should be properly trained and certified. Holding a PhD does not mean an academic is capable of examining well in the assessment. To be appointed as an examiner, one should be accredited. This initiative is inspired by the now implemented initiative on becoming and supporting supervisors at the University of Auckland (University of Auckland, 2012), where academics need to be accredited before supervising postgraduates. To become a main supervisor and maintain accreditation, academics need to fulfil the following criteria:

- attend the Orientation to Doctoral Education Policy and Process (ORIDOC) seminar;
- attend a doctoral briefing at least once every five years;
- be in permanent employment with the University of Auckland, or contracted by the University of Auckland for sufficient time to see a candidate through to completion;
- be employed in an academic staff position where the employment agreement includes a requirement that they undertake research;
- be research active.

(University of Auckland, 2012)

These guidelines for the accreditation of supervisors aim to ensure a consistent quality of postgraduate supervision at the university, with all supervisors expected to be well versed in supervision and research. Similar guidelines could be developed for examiners.

Another reason that examiners should be trained formally is that their role and practices in the viva are crucial for the assessment decision. They have a significant responsibility to ensure the assessment is valid and reliable. One way to make sure examiners are accountable is through training and certification; however, with rare exceptions, this is presently not being done. A glance at the appointment of examiners for the high-stakes English language test, International English Language Testing System (IELTS),<sup>5</sup> shows that examiners must be trained and certified before taking up the role. Regardless of the experience or expertise of examiners in teaching and researching the English language, they must be certified every two years as a means of ensuring the quality of their practice. This quality control is missing in the doctoral assessment, where examiners' practice is based on their experiences, rather than on professional training and development. Therefore, it is recommended that examiners receive training and perhaps be certified to allow them to fulfil their responsibilities in the assessment, ensure the quality of the thesis, and meet the expectations of the university.

While the IELTS and PhD viva examinations differ in their focus—English language proficiency for IELTS and research competency and communicative ability for the viva—they are alike in that both have a face-to-face oral component. Thus, some lessons for examiner recruitment and training could be learned from the IELTS test. The IELTS

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.ielts.org/researchers/examiner\\_information.aspx](http://www.ielts.org/researchers/examiner_information.aspx)

examiner recruitment and training process (IELTS, n.d.) involves six steps: 1) recruitment, 2) induction, 3) training, 4) certification, 5) monitoring and 6) standardisation and re-certification (see Appendix F). Table 3 adapts this to propose an example accreditation program for examiners, which is also informed by the University of Auckland’s Guidelines on Accreditation of Supervisors (2012).

**Table 3.** Proposed recruitment and training process for PhD examiners

<b>Recruitment and Training Process</b>	<b>The PhD Examiners</b>
1. Recruitment	Academics considered for the post of examiner should have:  a) a doctoral degree in a relevant field  b) supervised students at PhD level  and  c) be research active.
2. Induction	Attend the PDP on the doctoral examination policy at the university.
3. Training	Attend the PDP to obtain doctoral examination knowledge and skills.
4. Certification	Undertake a mock examination. Potential examiners are required to examine a thesis (in whole or in part) and to examine a recorded or mock viva to demonstrate their ability to assess the PhD. Once successful, they will be accredited examiners.
5. Monitoring	Examiners will be monitored by senior colleagues or examiners, at least once a year or more when needed. A peer review could be initiated for monitoring purpose.
6. Standardisation and Re-certification	To ensure standardisation of examining practice, examiners may be asked to re-certify every five years. The re-certification may involve conducting an assessment or a performance appraisal, as appropriate.

The proposed accreditation program is suitable not just for viva examiners, but it could also be used for the appointment and training of examiners for the written component of the PhD assessment. Under the accreditation program, academics who intend to become an examiner will have to be accredited. As part of the accreditation process, they will learn about the doctoral assessment policy and practice at the university, receive training and examine a sample thesis and/or a recorded viva with feedback provided. Accredited examiners can then be appointed as examiners at the university, placed under the tutelage of an experienced colleague. Examiners may also be asked to attend the training and repeat the certification process every five years.

### **7.3 Discussion**

In the previous section, I have presented three initiatives to support examiners and their practices of the PhD viva: a PDP, a peer review of the viva and an accreditation program. These initiatives are professional development opportunities to assist novice examiners to become competent and effective in the doctoral assessment. The suggested initiatives also serve to ensure examiners are using standard examining practices across the university, regardless of their discipline or level of experience. In other words, the initiatives aim to prepare potential examiners to meet the professional and personality requirements of the PhD assessment (Kiley, 2009b), with the intention of supporting examiners' community of practice.

It is important to understand that, despite the merits of the initiatives, they face some challenges in implementation. The PDP is likely to be the easiest initiative to implement and should not meet any major objection from academics. Various PDP programs related to

supervision and how to examine a written thesis are on offer at MY University and other universities. These programs are usually presented as two- or three-hour workshops or a one-day training and are favourable to academics. Various supervisory development workshops are also available (see Brew & Peseta, 2004; Kiley, 2011), and are known to be effective (McCulloch & Loeser, 2016). While the suggested PDP on the viva is not compulsory, it would be a useful addition to the professional development opportunities for academics.

The second suggested initiative, the peer review of the viva, may be challenging to implement due to the reliance on observation and experience sharing. Though many academics recognise the benefits of peer observation such as in developing teaching practice (Hendry & Oliver, 2012), some academics might be sceptical of the use of peer review in the viva. Such academics might wonder if their viva practices are being judged rather than being observed to foster dialogue about effective assessment. This raises the question of how comfortable examiners are in sharing their examining practices and experiences.

Another concern for implementing peer review is the power dynamic of the academics. For example, if the examiners under review are senior professors or hold a higher administrative position, will they welcome scrutiny of their examining practices by more junior colleagues? As a matter of fact, will the reviewers even critique their colleagues since maintaining social harmony in collectivist culture such as Malaysia's is the norm (Abdullah, 1996)? Despite these potential challenges, peer review is valuable for improving examiner practice of the viva.

The third initiative, the accreditation program, is likely to be the most difficult initiative for universities to implement. Although accreditation is vital to maintain the quality of doctoral assessment (Morley et al., 2002), executing the program would involve new doctoral policy and training, and thus an investment of financial and human resources. Appointing trainers to conduct the training and execute the program is not an easy task. Those trainers themselves should be experienced examiners, academic developers or researchers in the field of doctoral education, with up-to-date knowledge of examining, as well as familiarity with the academic practices and culture at the university. Although the accreditation initiative, if implemented successfully, could ensure the reliability and standardisation across the university of the assessment conducted by examiners, its success would require a high level of commitment, as the process is ongoing and time consuming.

The three initiatives discussed above are believed to be beneficial in better preparing examiners for the viva and doctoral assessment, in terms of having an impact on both the examiner and supervisory practice (McCulloch & Loeser, 2016). Nevertheless, the effectiveness and impact of these initiatives need to be evaluated, and any weaknesses of the initiatives within the Malaysian context need to be overcome. Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick's (2006) training evaluation model may be applied for the purpose of this evaluation. It is also crucial to determine how receptive to these initiatives academics at the Malaysian universities are, and the risks and consequences of these initiatives before, during and after implementation will need to be studied.

By proposing the above-mentioned initiatives, I do not claim that these are the only and the best initiatives for supporting examiners. There may be other initiatives and the

current mentoring program on offer in some universities may be perceived as sufficient. Also, I do not claim that examiners who do not attend institutional training are not able to examine effectively. In fact, I believe many examiners can examine well given their diverse experiences of teaching, learning, supervision and assessment in higher education. However, existing examiners have mostly learned through trial and error and they face examination challenges (see Chapter Six). Learning to examine in this way is time consuming and likely to be less effective than receiving institutional training to handle assessment. Therefore, the proposed initiatives are beneficial, especially for novice examiners and for universities, which strive to maintain a high level of quality assurance in doctoral assessment (Morley, et al., 2002). Although the initiatives proposed are principally derived from experience, they have the potential to be further developed, reviewed and refined. Further research that goes beyond the scope of the current study is required to plan and implement the initiatives to support examiners and their practices of assessing the PhD.

#### **7.4 Summary**

The discussions in this chapter add to the work on professional learning development for examiners of the doctoral assessment, and support academics in their endeavours in higher education. If examiners are to continue to play a gatekeeping role, they need support. The three proposed initiatives—a PDP, a peer review of the viva and an accreditation program—provide opportunities for knowledge exchange among examiners, support of examiners, and learning from colleagues. Together, these initiatives aim to ensure that universities are effectively supporting examiners and that examiners are truly experts in doctoral assessment.

In the next chapter, I conclude the study by providing a summary of Chapters Four to Seven, and discussing the implications of the findings for practice, as well as the contributions of the study.

## **Chapter Eight: Conclusion**

This study offers insights into assessment practices and experiences of the PhD viva from the examiner's perspective. The study was situated in the doctoral education context of Malaysia. Twelve examiners within a Malaysian research university were interviewed, and their narratives of experience were collected using a narrative approach. The analysis was informed by the theoretical perspectives of constructivism and narrative theory, coupled with the studies in doctoral assessment, and generated four themes as discussed in Chapters Four to Seven. This final chapter summarises the main findings and outlines the implications of the findings, discusses the limitations of the study and directions for future research, and ends with some concluding remarks.

### **8.1 Summary of the Main Findings**

To this point, I have discussed three main themes: the purposes of the PhD viva (Chapter Four), the expectations of the PhD viva performance (Chapter Five), learning to examine and the challenges in the PhD viva (Chapter Six). Each of the themes arose from the examiners' construction and recollection of memory, as well as my interpretation of their narratives. I argue that the findings, taken together, have the potential to enhance our understanding of the practices and experiences of examiners in the PhD viva. The themes are summarised in the following subsections.

### **8.1.1 The purpose of the PhD viva**

The PhD viva may be conceptualised and operationalised in diverse ways. To identify the purpose of the viva within a Malaysian doctoral education context, in Chapter Four I asked: *What are examiners' conceptualisations of the purpose of the viva?* The narratives of the examiners illustrate that while all examiners in this study perceived that the viva served different purposes (gatekeeping, empowerment, dialogue and enculturation), they mostly agreed that gatekeeping is the main purpose of the PhD viva, which reinforces the viva as primarily used for assessment. Chapter Four resulted in a new conceptual model for defining the PhD viva.

The findings also indicated that the examiners were largely influenced by the oral performance of the PhD candidate in making their decision and achieving the purpose of the viva. This affirms the important role of oral communication in the PhD viva within the Malaysian doctoral education context, making this a research-worthy topic. The notion of oral performance was further explored in Chapter Five.

### **8.1.2 The expectations of the candidate's oral performance**

Chapter Four argued that a candidate's oral performance in the viva plays an important part in examiners' decision making. Considering what constitutes an excellent viva performance is often undefined, the focus of Chapter Five was to identify the examiners' ideal expectations of candidates' oral performance in the PhD viva. The question proposed is: *What are examiners' expectations of the candidates' PhD viva performance?*

Examiners prefer and expect argumentative responses from candidates; they want to see the ability of the candidate to put forth an argument and rebuttal. When the examiners can identify these qualities in the candidate's oral performance, they will likely to pass the candidate. Conversely, if the candidate is defensive and unwilling to accept suggestions from the examiners, this may be detrimental to the assessment outcome and a re-viva may be recommended. In view of this preference and its implication for candidates, I present a model of expectations of the candidate's performance and argue that the expectations of examiners in terms of behaviour, responses and knowledge displayed should be made explicit to students and be adhered to by viva examiners.

### **8.1.3 Learning to examine and the challenges in the PhD viva**

It is crucial for the viva that examiner practices, such as finding out the purpose of the viva and knowing the expected oral performance of the candidate, are identified. However, how such practices develop and are learned by examiners remains unknown. In Chapter Six, I explored examiners' learning of the PhD viva and the challenges they faced while examining. Specifically, the chapter explores the two questions: *How do examiners learn to examine in the PhD viva? What are some of the examination challenges encountered by the examiners?*

Examiners who examine in the viva are often self-taught and base their approaches to the viva on their prior knowledge and their examining experience. Of those interviewed, many expressed that they did not receive formal training from the university, and that they learned to examine from their own observations and practices. The findings from the narratives of the examiners revealed the potential pitfalls of this method of learning to

examine the viva and the need for developmental support, resulting in a call for examiner education. Potential solutions to support examiners and ensure quality practices in the viva were proposed, directed towards academic developers and universities. These proposed solutions were to:

- identify the training needs of examiners
- encourage examiners to reflect on their practice and enhance it, if necessary
- encourage examiners to share their practice with others
- monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the training
- provide ongoing accessible support systems to enable effective learning and assessment
- conduct research to identify best practice for the PhD viva.

Finally, if examiners are to continue to play the gatekeeping role in doctoral assessment, they need support. I have argued in Chapter Six that issues and gaps exist in the training of examiners for the PhD viva, and that there is a need to equip examiners with the knowledge and skills for examining, particularly in the PhD viva. Chapter Seven attempted to address the training needs of viva examiners and responded to the question: *How should examiners and their practices in the PhD viva be supported by the university towards effective assessment?* Three initiatives: a PDP, a peer review model and an accreditation program were proposed to make space for systemic support, and for knowledge exchange among examiners, mentor support, and learning from colleagues. These initiatives aim to enhance current PhD viva examiner training initiatives in higher education. It is hoped that when examiners are supported, their practices of the viva will be enhanced.

## **8.2 Implications for Practice**

While this study was never intended to be generalisable, three main implications can be drawn from the findings for MY university that may be applicable to similar doctoral education contexts. First, examiners are encouraged to rethink their assessment practices of the PhD viva. Examiners should not rely solely on their prior knowledge to examine nor depend on the advice of others. In fact, examiners should make sense of their own PhD viva practices to identify what works or what does not to develop assessment competence. One way to do this is to think of the aim of the assessment. Examiners could draw on the findings about the purposes of the viva (see Chapter Four) when designing viva questions, for example. Using a conceptual framework that encompasses the four purposes found to underpin viva examining practices would help examiners to construct meaningful viva questions suited to the gatekeeping purpose on one end and the enculturation purpose on the other end. Encouraging examiners to rethink and realign their examining practices with those of others would raise their awareness of the assessment practices of different examiners in the PhD viva, thus enhancing their own practice.

Second, examiners should be motivated to share their examining practices with other examiners. Given the powerful role examiners are playing in the viva, it is essential for them to exchange knowledge and skills of examination. The narratives of examiners stand to offer insight into examining practices that may be useful to examiners in future. For example, examiners could visualise the PhD viva scenarios as narrated by other examiners. Moreover, through conversations between examiners, entrenched examining practices could be changed, and examiners might find solutions to the issues and dilemmas they face in

examining the viva. They might even develop more effective examining skills and strategies to try out in achieving the aim of the assessment.

Lastly, to bring improvement to examiner practices of the viva and to empower examiners, continuous training and support is necessary. Professional development initiatives at the university should be introduced. As discussed in Chapters Six and Seven, professional development for examiners is essential, and three training initiatives are proposed: a PDP, a peer review of the viva and an accreditation program. Academic developers could support examiners to examine more effectively by taking up any of the initiatives proposed. Such initiatives are likely to contribute to improved and informed examining practice in the PhD viva and are particularly useful for educating new examiners.

### **8.3 Contributions of the Study**

This study makes three important contributions to the growing area of research in examiner experiences, doctoral assessment and education. First, this novel study sheds light on the doctoral examiner practices and experiences of the PhD viva in the Malaysian doctoral education context and enhances understanding of the doctoral assessment, alongside other studies in doctoral education (Carter, 2008; Clark & Lunt, 2014; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000). Second, it explores examiner experiences to identify the learning needs and required supports for examiners—a topic not yet well studied in the literature (Sankaran, Swepson & Hill, 2005; Wisker & Kiley, 2014). Lastly, it supports the worthiness of the narrative perspective for gaining insights into this topic. These contributions are discussed in more detail below.

Exploring the examining experiences of PhD viva examiners within a Malaysian context represents a valuable contribution to the literature. Given the rise of postgraduates pursuing doctorates in Malaysia, given the desperate need of doctoral supervisors and examiners to supervise and examine the candidates, and given the development of doctoral education in this era of globalisation, an understanding of examiners and their practices of the viva is crucial. The study presents and discusses insights from examiners taking part in the PhD viva at a Malaysian university, in an attempt to reveal what happens in the doctoral assessment (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). By making sense of the narratives of examiners, their practices and experiences were laid out. For example, Chapter Five explored examiners' expectations of ideal candidate's performance in the viva. The examiners' voices not only provided insight into the Malaysian context, but also added to the growing literature on the examiner expectations in the PhD viva (e.g. Carter, 2008; Tinkler & Jackson, 2002).

Another contribution of the study concerns identification of the need for systemic support for examiners. The study showed that examiners are generally lacking access to learning experiences and formal examiner education. Existing studies tend to focus on preparing students for the PhD viva, rather than on preparing examiners to assess the viva. In Chapter Six, this study argued that support for examiners is needed, especially in the Malaysian context; specifically, examiners' assessment practices of the viva need to be reviewed and supported by the university. In view of the absence of and need for professional development for examiners, a framework to support examiners was proposed in Chapter Seven. It is hoped that examiners' practices can be made more effective through institutional training, thereby enhancing the quality assurance of the assessment (Morley et al., 2002).

A third contribution of the study is its use of the narrative approach. This method made available the assessment practices and experiences of the examiners in the PhD viva. As access to the viva in Malaysia is restricted, using narratives created space for the examiners' often-unheard voices. For academics and researchers who do not have exposure to the viva, one of the best means of making sense of the viva is through the learning of individual experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Listening to the voices of examiners could also inform a training program for examiners. Thus, the narratives were a valuable source not just for investigating practice, but also for informing practice improvement and program design.

Apart from making the voices of examiners heard, the narrative approach used in this study complements existing studies on doctoral assessment and education. Past studies relied on the narratives of examiners to make sense of experiences and practices (see Carter, 2008; Mullins & Killey, 2002). The current study is in line with these and confirms the usefulness of the narrative approach. Further, the findings obtained from these narratives could provide thoughts to examiners and prompt them to reflect on their practice.

Lastly, for researchers who are interested in the PhD viva and in higher education, the study serves as an impetus for further research on the topic. New perspectives on the PhD viva and examiners may be arrived at, which will advance the knowledge base of doctoral assessment.

## **8.4 Limitations of the Study**

As with all research studies, there were limitations involved in this study. Although I consistently endeavoured to eliminate the limitations, sometimes they were beyond my control given the time, skill and knowledge constraints I faced while conducting the study. First, the research design of the study could be regarded as a limitation. If the study had used a different research design, the findings might have been different (Cresswell, 2014). For example, if I had chosen a quantitative survey method, the outcomes would not have been the same. Therefore, it should be noted that the qualitative methodology employed in this study was grounded in my philosophical belief and constructivist position, which was explained and justified in Chapter Three.

Another limitation was the small number of participants involved. As I targeted experienced examiners from one particular university in Malaysia who had examined at least five theses and taken part in the PhD viva, the study only included the PhD viva experiences of 12 examiners. The qualitative methodology used supports keeping the number of participants small. Cresswell (2014) explains that a manageable number of participants is typical in qualitative research and can provide meaningful insights. Hence, my intention in this study was not to generalise, but to gain insights into examiner practices in the PhD viva. Another reason for having a limited number of participants was the data collection difficulties and time constraints. In follow-up research, a larger number of examiners across disciplines or universities could be interviewed or surveyed to gain a bigger picture of examiner practices in the viva within a Malaysian or Asian doctoral education context.

The use of interviews as primary data could be regarded as another limitation. This study gathered the narratives of experienced examiners only. This was not intentional but purposeful. One reason for using interview data was the methodological challenges of collecting other forms of confidential data, such as examiner reports or direct observations of the viva. Despite efforts to convince the participants to allow these kinds of data collection, I could not secure unanimous consent to proceed with collecting this confidential data. In hindsight, I would collect the narratives of both novice and experienced examiners to provide richer detail of examining in the viva. I would also have tried more assertively to convince the graduate school to assist in collecting examiner reports and direct observations, which would have allowed a far more comprehensive assessment of examiner practices in the viva.

## **8.5 Directions for Future Research**

While attempting to answer the research questions, this study has raised further questions that might be asked of the examiners and the PhD viva. It was difficult to deal with all the issues encountered throughout the study due to the lack of time and the narrow scope of the study. However, the issues raised have important implications for doctoral education and would benefit from further research.

First, the actual practices in the closed-door viva should be scrutinised. Opening the door to the viva would provide opportunities for interdisciplinary research, especially in applied linguistics and discourse research. For example, a discourse analysis of the practices in the viva would shed light on the interactions between the members. The link between the interactions of the members and the decision making of examiners could also be studied. As

a consequence, the insider knowledge of the viva could form the basis of a training guide for viva preparation for both examiners and candidates.

Another area of potential further research is examiner practices. Since examiners play an important role in the viva, their practices should be examined further. Questions that might be asked include:

- What does it mean to be a good examiner?
- What should a good examiner do in the PhD viva?
- What kind of assessment practices are considered effective?

The answers to these questions would provide a better understanding of examining practices and examiners' expectations.

Third, further studies are needed on professional development for examiners. One such study might implement and evaluate the initiatives to support examiners proposed in this study (see Chapter Seven). Since examiners play a crucial role in the doctoral assessment, their practices must be better supported. Their voices could be gathered to explore further issues such as effective examining approaches, handling of students and decision making in the viva and assessment.

Fourth, the usefulness and impact of the PhD viva in doctoral assessment should be investigated. Recent research concluded that the viva has minimal impact on the assessment (Lovat et al., 2015); however, this view is contested, and the viva remains part of doctoral

assessment in almost all universities worldwide. Thus, further research should investigate the impact of the viva in doctoral education in Malaysia and if it should be abolished or replaced with another form of assessment.

Last, the doctoral assessment process should be examined critically. Given the diverse assessment procedures used in doctoral education (Kyvik, 2014; Tinkler & Jackson, 2000), further research should examine the whole doctoral examination process starting from written thesis examination through the viva. For example, in-depth accounts of how examiners act and make decisions along the way would help to demystify the doctoral examination and ensure an improved assessment regime.

## **8.6 Concluding Remarks**

No matter how well a PhD candidate has done his or her research, they must be able to communicate the research findings in an acceptable manner in written and oral form. Given the limitation of the time, skill, knowledge and resource constraints of the candidate, perfect PhD research does not exist, yet examiners can still challenge the thesis put forth sometimes unfairly. The PhD viva allows the candidate to respond to the examiners verbally; however, the purpose is not always just to address the inadequacy of the written thesis, but also to enable further research conversations among members of the discourse community (Tinkler & Jackson, 2004). The viva is thus a communication event much like a departmental seminar or conference (Murray, 2009), but with the purpose of evaluation leading to the PhD degree.

To allow them to examine the viva effectively, examiners' practices in the viva need review and support. As evident in the current study, institutional support is lacking, and the examiners mostly examine through trial and error, resulting in different assessment practices. This scenario has been observed in other universities and countries (Morley et al., 2002; Park, 2003). In addition, unpleasant anecdotes and stories of the PhD viva are common, including tales of examiner malpractice (Pearce, 2005), which are also evident in the examiner narratives in MY university. To ensure that examiners follow best examining practices in the PhD viva, the initiatives proposed in this study should be considered. For instance, a PDP should be planned and implemented, and examiners should be encouraged to reflect on and share their examining practices with others.

Despite having been able to offer some insights into examiner practices in the PhD viva and their experiences in departmental seminars and conference presentations (see Appendix G) drawing from my study and the literature, many unanswered questions remain. Having taken these first steps into new territory, I now aspire to identify best examiner practice of the PhD viva in doctoral education to help to prepare examiners and students for the assessment.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A- Examiner Report Template from MY university

<b>THESIS EXAMINATION REPORT</b>	
<b>Faculty/Institute</b> : Choose an item.	
<b>Programme</b> : <input type="checkbox"/> PhD <input type="checkbox"/> Master	
<b>Student's Name</b> :	<b>Matric No.</b> :
<b>Thesis Title</b> :	
<b>Examiner's Name</b> :	
<b>E-mail Address</b> : <b>Telephone No.</b> :	
<b>SECTION A: EXAMINER'S EVALUATION</b>	
<i>For each section, please insert your comments in the space provided, and suggest improvements where relevant. Please also rate the relevant section on a scale of 1 to 5: (1 = Poor 2 =Fair; 3 = Good; 4; Very Good; 5 = Excellent).</i>	
<b>1. THESIS TOPIC (TITLE)</b>	
<i>Check if the keywords are found in the title, and whethertitle accurately reflects the actual research issues addressed in the study. Suggest a suitable title if the title requires improvement.</i>	
(Type your comments here)	
<i>Poor</i> <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <i>Excellent</i>	
<b>2. ABSTRACT</b>	
<i>Determine if the abstract contains a concise description of the study. This includes: (i) problem statement or objectives, (ii) research method and design, (iii) summary of major findings and (iv) brief conclusions.</i>	
(Type your comments here)	
<i>Poor</i> <input type="checkbox"/> 1 <input type="checkbox"/> 2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3 <input type="checkbox"/> 4 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 <i>Excellent</i>	
1   5	

**3. RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES**

*Determine whether the background to the study is well discussed, the research problems well defined, and the hypotheses address the defined research problem. Check that the objectives are clearly stated and met by the research methodology/design used and findings.*

(Type your comments here)

Poor  1  2  3  4  5 Excellent

**4. SCOPE AND RELEVANCE**

*Determine whether the scope of the study is appropriate for the degree it is intended, the field of study, the research issues, the practicability of the addressed research problem, and research objectives.*

(Type your comments here)

Poor  1  2  3  4  5 Excellent

**5. LITERATURE REVIEW**

*Determine whether the literature review: is relevant to the research issues, is comprehensive and takes into consideration past and current literature, is well-reviewed, summarised, organised and consistent with the sequence of the research issues addressed in the study, has identified the gap of knowledge, is proportionate relative to the rest of the thesis, or contains too much textbook material.*

(Type your comments here)

Poor  1  2  3  4  5 Excellent

**6. METHODOLOGY/MATERIALS AND METHODS**

*Determine whether the collection, strengths and weaknesses of the data used in the study are clearly specified, the research design (e.g. sample size, choice of methods etc) is suitable and appropriate to meet or address the specified objectives or research issues of the study, the use or choice of methods is well defined and justified, methods used in the study are clearly described to allow replication by other researchers, the statistical analysis or package used is appropriate, methods used are properly and adequately referenced.*

(Type your comments here)

Poor

1

2

3

4

5

Excellent

**7. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULT**

*Determine whether the results obtained are in agreement with the stated objectives of study, interpretation of the findings is logical or acceptable within the context of the issues of interest, analysis of the data using the chosen methodology has been properly specified, findings are discussed with appropriate references and candidate has related this to previous published work, where relevant.*

(Type your comments here)

Poor

1

2

3

4

5

Excellent

**8. PRESENTATION**

*Determine whether the sequence of chapters, and sections in each chapter are able to facilitate the understanding of the research issues, the tables, pictures and any other form of summarised information are properly labelled, numbered, and placed in the appropriate sequence and section of the thesis, the same research data is presented in more than one form (e.g. both table and figure), figures, especially photographs, are clearly reproduced.*

(Type your comments here)

Poor

1

2

3

4

5

Excellent

**9. REFERENCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Determine the extensiveness of the bibliography/reference list, whether current references are included, whether any reference cited in the text is missing or wrongly cited, and whether the format used is consistent throughout the list.*

(Type your comments here)

Poor

1

2

3

4

5

Excellent

**SECTION B: OTHER COMMENTS**

**10. ACCOMPLISHMENT AND/OR MERITS**

Indicate whether the author has clearly identified and discussed the contributions of the findings to the knowledge in the area, and the applicability of the findings in addressing the research problems in the study, the stated objectives are achieved, and include any other accomplishments that merit a mention.

(Type here your comments)

**11. DEMERITS**

Indicate whether there are demerits in terms of contents, language, relevance, etc. Indicate if the Similarity Text Search Report shows texts that have been plagiarised.

(Type here your comments)

**SECTION C: LIST OF REQUIRED REVISIONS (IF ANY)**

- List of specific comments or suggestions that require the attention of the student to improve the thesis.
- List of questions that may require elaborations and clarifications during the viva voce.

(Type here your comments)

**SECTION D: RECOMMENDATION**

**Accepted with Distinction**

A thesis is accepted with distinction when all or most of the research findings have either been published or accepted for publication in citation-indexed journals, and requires minimal improvements in language only.

**Accepted with Minor Modifications**

A thesis is accepted with minor modifications if it requires any of the following: reformatting of chapters, revision of literature, improvement in the declaration of research objectives or statements, insertion of missing references, amendment of inaccurately cited references, and other minor improvements including language.

**Accepted with Major Modifications**



A thesis is accepted with major modifications if it requires any of the following *but not additional experimental work or data collection*: extensive revision of the entire thesis to improve quality such as major improvement in description of methodology, statistical re-analysis of research data, removal of research chapter(s), and re-discussion of the results, including improvements in language.

The examiner may recommend that the student seek the assistance of an editing service if language errors are extensive.

**Oral Re-examination (Re-viva voce)**



A thesis can be recommended for a second and final oral re-examination (re-viva voce) to be conducted within sixty (60) days after the date of the first viva voce.

**Re-submission of Thesis**



A thesis should be recommended for re-submission if it does not meet the scope of the degree for which it is intended, the objectives of the research are not met and/or when there are obvious flaws in the experimental design and/or methodology, and therefore, *requires additional experimental work or data collection*.

**Re-submission as a Masters Thesis**



A thesis can be recommended for re-submission to be accepted for the award of a Masters degree if the thesis does not meet the scope of a doctoral thesis but is adequate for a Masters degree. All amendments recommended by the Thesis Examination Committee must be made and the thesis resubmitted to the School for examination as a Masters thesis within 60 days of the viva voce.

**Rejection of Thesis (Fail)**



A 'Fail' status is given if the thesis fails to meet the requirements of a PhD or Masters academic level or found to have been plagiarised.

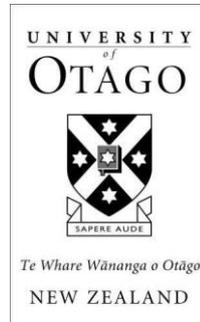
**SECTION D: SIGNATURE**

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Examiner's Signature and Official Stamp**

**Date** : [Click here to enter a date.](#)

## Appendix B- Information Sheet and Consent Form for Participants

[12/183]  
[20/7/2012]



### **EXPLORING THE DISCOURSE OF DOCTORAL VIVA IN HIGHER EDUCATION: PRACTICE AND IMPLICATIONS**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR EXAMINERS**

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you and we thank you for considering our request.

#### **What is the Aim of the Project?**

The aim of this project is to identify best practice in examiner-candidate interactions in the PhD viva (oral examination) at a research university in New Zealand and Malaysia.

#### **What Type of Participants are being sought?**

I am seeking doctoral examiners and candidates from the two universities. As an examiner, we are seeking your participation.

#### **What will Participants be Asked to Do?**

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to participate in an interview. The interview will be about an hour long and will be focused on your experiences, communication practices and reflections of participating in a PhD viva.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

#### **What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?**

The interview will be audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and returned to you for checking. These data will be analysed using a computer assisted qualitative software, Nvivo and a general inductive approach to elicit main themes. The general line of questioning includes the issues

related to the experiences, communicative practices, and reflections of participating in a PhD viva in higher education institution. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s) and also that you may withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

The data collected will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned below will be able to gain access to it. Data obtained as a result of the research will be retained for **at least 5 years** in secure storage. Any personal information held on the participants such as recordings, transcriptions of the recordings, and contact details may be destroyed at the completion of the research even though the data derived from the research will, in most cases, be kept for much longer or possibly indefinitely.

The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

#### **Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

#### **What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Mr Tan Wee Chun

and/or

Dr Vijay Kumar Mallan

Department of Higher Education

Department of Higher Education

University Telephone Number: 034798415

University Telephone Number: 034798489

Email Address: weechun.tan@otago.ac.nz

Email Address: vijay.mallan@otago.ac.nz

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

[12/183]  
[20/7/2012]

**EXPLORING THE DISCOURSE OF DOCTORAL VIVA IN HIGHER EDUCATION:  
PRACTICE AND IMPLICATIONS**

**CONSENT FORM FOR EXAMINERS**

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Personal identifying information such as audio recording will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for at least five years;
4. This project involves an interview. The general line of questioning includes the issues related to the experiences, communicative practices, and reflections of participating in a PhD viva in higher education institution. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind;
5. There will be no remuneration or compensation for the participants, and commercial use of the data;
6. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand), but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....  
(Name of participant)

.....  
(Signature of participant)

.....  
(Date)

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

## Appendix C- Invitation Email for Recruitment of Participants

### **Have you participated in the PhD viva as an examiner? Ever wanted to share your viva experience?**

Dear XXX,

My name is Wee Chun, a PhD candidate at the University of Otago, New Zealand. The purpose of my PhD study is to identify best practice in examiner-candidate interactions in a PhD viva. To do so, I am looking for PhD examiners and candidates who have participated and who are going to participate in a PhD viva. If you have been a PhD viva examiner, I wonder if I could invite you to participate in my study.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview of up to 60 minutes long. The questions include your experiences of interacting with PhD candidates and reflections of participating in a PhD viva.

I am currently based at the MY university until March 2013.

If you are interested in my study or would like more information, please contact:

Mr. Wee Chun, Tan  
E-mail: [weechun.tan@otago.ac.nz](mailto:weechun.tan@otago.ac.nz)  
Phone: 018-2925865

I look forward to your participation in this study.

Thank you in advance.

Yours Sincerely,  
Wee Chun

*This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee (Ref 12/183) and the Dean of School of Graduate Studies, the MY university.*

## Appendix D- Interview Protocol

Project: Exploring the Discourse of PhD viva in Higher Education; Practice and Implications

Time of Interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewee:

Questions:

1. How many PhD viva have you participated as an examiner?
2. As an examiner, have you received any training in participating in a PhD viva? If yes, please specify... If no, how do you learn how to participate?
3. Can you tell me about the PhD viva at the institution? What does it look like?
4. As an examiner, what are you trying to achieve in a viva?
5. What do you normally expect from a candidate in the PhD viva?
6. What do you normally talk about in the PhD viva?
7. How do you make decision in the PhD viva? Will you change your initial decision? If so, why?
8. How do you talk to a PhD candidate in the PhD viva? Will there be a difference when talking to international/ English as an Additional Language candidate?
9. What are the factors that you consider when talking to a candidate in the PhD viva?
10. From your experience, what makes a PhD viva successful? Why? Any example?
11. Have you ever faced any challenges/problems participating in a PhD viva?
12. Can you describe a PhD viva that you have recently participated? Did it go well?
13. Have you ever wondered how a PhD candidate would perceive your examination/communication practice? Whether it's effective?
14. What do you want other examiners or students to know about your experiences in participating in a PhD viva?
15. If there is a professional development workshop on "participating and communicating effectively in the PhD viva". What would you expect to learn? And how?
16. Do you have anything to add that we have not talked about?

Thank you for participating in this interview.

## **Appendix E – Thesis Examination Criteria at the University of Otago**

1. Does the thesis comprise a coherent investigation of the chosen topic?
2. Does the thesis deal with a topic of sufficient range and depth to meet the requirements of the degree?
3. Does the thesis make an original contribution to knowledge in its field and contain material suitable for publication in an appropriate academic journal?
4. Does the thesis meet internationally recognised standards for the conduct and presentation of research in the field?
5. Does the thesis demonstrate both a thorough knowledge of the literature relevant to its subject and general field and the candidate's ability to exercise critical and analytical judgement of that literature?
6. Does the thesis display mastery of appropriate methodology and/or theoretical material?

(University of Otago, 2014, p.58)

## Appendix F- The Recruitment and Training Process of IELTS Examiners (2016)

<b>Recruitment and training process<sup>6</sup></b>	<b>IELTS Writing and Speaking Examiner</b>
<b>1. Recruitment</b>	<p>All applicants for the post of examiner must have the qualifications and experience outlined below:</p> <p>Applicants must have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) An undergraduate degree or Master’s degree or qualification(s) that can be demonstrated to be equivalent to an undergraduate degree or Master’s degree (3 years’ full-time academic study, or a minimum of one year’s full-time academic study in the case of a Master’s degree).</li> </ul> <p>And</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>b) A TEFL/TESOL qualification from a recognised institution (certificate level or above)</li> </ul> <p>Or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A degree in education (if supported by an undergraduate degree which includes studies focused on English Language)</li> <li>c) Substantial relevant teaching experience, the majority of which must relate to adult students (16 years and over).</li> </ul> <p>Applicants must then be approved by a qualified examiner trainer. After approval, the applicant undertakes face-to-face training conducted by an accredited IELTS examiner trainer and a certification assessment.</p> <p>Shortlisted applicants are invited to interview. The applicant’s professional attributes and interpersonal skills are assessed at three stages in the recruitment process: application form, interview and training.</p>
<b>2. Induction</b>	Following an interview, successful applicants complete an induction process.
<b>3. Training</b>	Applicants who successfully complete induction proceed to training in Writing and Speaking assessment, which is carried out by an examiner trainer and lasts four days.
<b>4. Certification</b>	Applicants then complete a certification set to demonstrate that they can apply the assessment criteria accurately and reliably. If successful, they become qualified examiners.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ielts.org/teaching-and-research/examiner-recruitment-and-training>

<b>5. Monitoring</b>	Examiners are monitored by examiner trainers up to four times a year and at least once every two years. New examiners (and those who have not recently worked as IELTS examiners) are monitored at least three times in their first year. All examiners receive written feedback on their ratings and also on the delivery of the Speaking test. They may be required to take corrective action if any issues are raised about their performance.
<b>6. Standardisation and re-certification</b>	Standardisation is completed at the centre and takes place as close as possible to the 2-yearly re-certification of the examiner. After the standardisation session, the examiners then complete a new certification set to demonstrate they can apply the assessment criteria accurately.

## **Appendix G- A List of Research Presentations Arising from this Study**

- Tan, W, C. & Mallan, V. K. (2014, April). *'Attacks in the doctoral viva': Critical narrative insights from experienced doctoral examiners*. Paper presented at the 11<sup>th</sup> Biennial Quality in Postgraduate Research (QPR) Conference, Adelaide, Australia. [A case study of two examiners arising from Chapter 4]
- Tan, W, C. & Mallan, V. K. (2014, September). *Deciphering the narratives of and for practice: The case of doctoral viva examiners*. Paper presented at the 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice (ALAPP): Learning through and for professional practice, Geneva, Switzerland. [An earlier version of the method of data analysis from Chapter 3]
- Tan, W, C. (2015, November). *Being an attacker of the PhD viva: Examiners' narratives of practice*. Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> Discourse and Society International Conference: Discourse and Identity in Asia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. [A version of Chapter 6]
- Tan, W, C. (2015, November). *Being an attacker of the PhD viva: Examiners' narratives of practice*. Paper presented at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Echo Seminar, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. [A version of Chapter 6 with the addition of the implications for language education]