

# Preparing for Your Oral Examination at PolyU

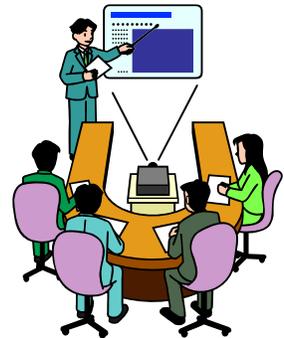
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You have finished your research, submitted your thesis, and now you are waiting for your oral examination. The oral exam is a mysterious process for many students and this can make the wait very stressful.

**What can you expect? How can you prepare? And what is the point?**

## What is the purpose of an oral examination?

The oral exam allows you to show that you understand your research, the literature and the subject as a whole. It provides you with an opportunity to demonstrate that you can talk about your work in a professional manner. It gives your examiners the chance to question you on any areas that are not clear to them, and evaluate whether the work is your own. This process helps them to determine if you should pass your degree and consider what, if any, corrections need to be made.



## What are the possible outcomes following your oral examination?

If your research is particularly strong and you have presented and defended it well, you may be awarded your MPhil or PhD straight away. More likely, the examiners will tell you what corrections, additional work or extra assignments need to be done. This extra work will usually have to be done within three months, but you will be given a specific date by your examiners. In cases where it has been decided that there are major deficiencies in your work, you may be required to take another oral exam, or another form of exam. If your thesis and oral exam are particularly weak, you may fail, or, if you are a PhD candidate, you may be awarded an MPhil instead.

Your result does not depend entirely on your thesis; your oral exam is important! With this in mind, it is important that you know what to expect, what is expected of you, and that you prepare well for it.

## Who comes to your oral examination?

The following people will be at your oral exam:

- ☺ The Chairman of your Board of Examiners. He or she will be a senior member of PolyU.
- ☺ Your Chief Supervisor and two external examiners. For PhD oral exams, your overseas external examiners will be in attendance. For MPhil oral exams, your overseas examiners will not attend, but their comments are represented through correspondence.
- ☺ Other PolyU academic and research staff, research students and guests invited by your department.

## What happens?

Oral exams at PolyU usually last for about two hours. There are several stages and the sequence is determined by individual Board of Examiners.

- ⊕ Discussions by Board of Examiners.
- ⊕ You will present your work to the examiners and others in attendance.
- ⊕ The examiners and guests will ask questions. Guests' questions will be directed through the Chair.
- ⊕ There will be a session involving further discussion between you and the examiners. Whether it is open or closed will depend on the policy adopted by the Faculty/School with which you are affiliated.
- ⊕ The examiners will discuss your work in private. You will wait outside.
- ⊕ You will be called back into the room to be informed of the result and the examiners' recommendations.

## How do you prepare?

### *Review your research*

You will be examined on your research, so it is of absolute importance that you know your work inside out!

The best way to do this is to reread your thesis from cover to cover, starting at least a few weeks before your oral exam. When you do so, keep an eye on the following:

- ? What have you researched? What have you demonstrated or argued?
- ? What contribution have you made to the field?
- ? What is your methodology?
- ? Which areas of the thesis are particularly pivotal or important? Marking these sections (with Post-it notes, for example) can help you if you want to refer to them in your oral exam.

- ? What are the weaker points of your thesis? What might you do differently if you were to start again or were to conduct similar research? Which parts might be considered weak? What will you say if these areas are questioned?
- ? Is there anything that is not in the thesis, such as raw data, that might be useful in the oral exam? You can bring these things to the exam.
- ? What are your most important references?

It is worth refreshing your knowledge of the key literature. Your examiners might refer to the literature that you cite, or even other literature. It is very useful if you can talk about that literature and its relation to your work. Keeping abreast of developments since your submission is also important as you may be asked how your work relates to these developments.

Understanding the style and professional interests of your examiners can be very useful. Reading some of their papers and learning about their research interests will help you understand their perspectives and how you can best defend your work. Particularly attend to their comments and questions that are released to you, usually no later than a week before your oral exam.

If you have already exposed your work to criticism through seminars or publications, think about any challenges or criticisms you faced. Have these been addressed? Will you be able to adequately address them in your oral exam?

### ***Practise your presentation***

Board of Examiners' Reports reinforce how important it is to get some practise in presenting your work.

Mock oral exams are very useful for preparation. It is best, if at all possible, to have someone other than your supervisor conduct a mock exam – they need only read your abstract, introduction and conclusion. PolyU recommends that you have a mock exam, so do not be scared to ask your supervisor to help arrange one. You can also learn about how to perform effectively by attending the oral exams of other people in your department.

### ***Extract from BoE report***

“The performance of the [PhD] candidate during the oral examination was very satisfactory. Her presentation was carefully prepared, well organised, clearly delivered, with fluent English, proper visual aids, and good style. The materials were well chosen, the pace of presentation was under good control, and the BoE was very impressed with that.”

In your own exam, you will only have about 30 minutes to present your work. Your examiners will be looking to make sure that you have a clear understanding of the work that you have done. Therefore, you have important decisions about what to put into your presentation and what to leave out. Will you provide an overview? Or might it be better to focus on the highlights? Talk about this with your supervisor. Attend the oral exams of other people in your department and learn from them.

If you are not confident about making an oral presentation, it is important to find out what is involved and develop your skills. There are some useful resources listed at the end of this document. Training is offered through PolyU's English Language Centre and Department of English from time to time.

*Extract from BoE report*

“The candidate’s performance is up to standard as a whole. However, his presentation skills have to be sharpened for better academic development.”

***Anticipate questions and practise answers***

It is imperative that you are able to address the particular questions from your examiners that are included in the comments that are released to you prior to your exam. While you are waiting for these, or in the case that no questions are provided, you can anticipate that your examiners will probably ask you general questions about, for example, your choice of topic and contribution. They will also ask you questions designed to test specific areas of your knowledge or about any areas of the thesis that are not clear.

These are some areas that you may be questioned in<sup>1</sup>.

- ? Why you are interested in your area of research. Why you chose to research in this area.
- ? How your work relates to and differs from other work.
- ? What work or theories your research draws from.
- ? How and why you chose your methodology and what other methodologies you considered.
- ? How you interpreted your data.
- ? Whether your conclusions are justifiable.
- ? What contributions you have made to your field. Whether your work is obvious.
- ? What parts of your work surprised you.
- ? Why you included a particular section, or why you did not include something.
- ? Where you would take the work next.
- ? What your publication plans are.

*Extract from BoE report*

“A few questions were asked by non-BoE members, primarily by staff members, who asked the candidate to clarify some points made in the presentation. [The candidate] handled these questions very well. It was obvious that these questions did not surprise her and she had good understanding of the questions and the related aspects of the research project. The people were satisfied with the answers of the candidate and the way she handled the questions.”

It can be useful to write some of your thoughts about these and other questions. As well as practising answers in writing, practise speaking them. Think about how you would elaborate on your answers if the examiners continued to probe. You cannot predict exactly what you will be asked so you need to remain flexible with your ideas. Get some practise with a classmate who has some knowledge of your work and is willing to put questions to you, challenge your assumptions and interrupt you. All these things might happen to you in your actual exam, so prepare for them.

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<sup>1</sup> These draw heavily from Rugg and Petre's *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research*.

### **The day before**

The day before your oral exam, make sure you know where you have to go and the names of your examiners. Prepare everything that you need to take with you and get your clothes ready. Get a good night's sleep so you will be alert the next day.

### **How to behave during the oral exam**

Some tips:

- ✎ Be early.
- ✎ Do not panic.
- ✎ Show enthusiasm for your work.
- ✎ Be robust, but not dogmatic, in defending your work.
- ✎ Communicate well. Make eye contact, when appropriate, and listen carefully.
- ✎ Remember to stop and think. Answers do not have to be instantaneous!
- ✎ If you do not understand, you can ask the examiner to repeat or rephrase the question. If you are unsure whether or not you understand correctly, you can offer your interpretation of the question to elicit confirmation or clarification. If you are still not sure how to respond to a question, do not lie or try to bluff your way through. Instead, do your best, or acknowledge that you will need to give it further consideration.

*Extract from BoE report*

“He appeared nervous at the start but managed to compose himself and deliver a clear and precise presentation that reflected correctly his research work and results.”

### **After the oral exam**

Do not immediately disappear! The examiners will need to call you back to discuss any recommendations. There is no point in arguing with their recommendations during the exam. If you are unhappy with the recommendations, seek advice from your supervisor. If you are still unhappy or if you think that the process was unfair, you can lodge an appeal within a month of notification of your result. The process for complaints and appeals is outlined in Section P15 of the Research Student Handbook.

Having just finished your thesis, remember that you probably know more about your topic of research than anyone in the world. Prepare to present and talk about your research articulately and with clarity, and then go into your exam with confidence!



## Resources

*Remember that oral examination procedures vary in different universities. You should make every attempt to find out the situation at PolyU and take only general advice from resources from other universities.*

The PolyU *Research Student Handbook* provides information about regulations and administrative procedures with respect to the examination of your MPhil or PhD. Get a copy from the Research Office or download from their site:

[https://my.polyu.edu.hk/Director/jsp/app/com/polyu/jsp/search\\_rshb2\\_frame.jsp?theme=blue](https://my.polyu.edu.hk/Director/jsp/app/com/polyu/jsp/search_rshb2_frame.jsp?theme=blue)

Rowena Murray's *How to Survive Your Viva: Defending a Thesis in an Oral Examination* (call number: [LB2369 .M86 2003](#)) is well worth reading. The book includes real examples of questions and answers, actual experiences, planning tools, a preparation framework and specific verbal strategies to use in the viva to do justice to the thesis. If you do not have time to read the book, check out her article *Survive Your Viva*, published in *The Guardian*: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2003/sep/16/highereducation.postgraduate>

In the journal *Science*, Phil Dee describes two ways to approach *The PhD Viva: Survive or Thrive*.

[http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career\\_development/previous\\_issues/articles/1960/the\\_phd\\_viva\\_thrive\\_or\\_survive](http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_development/previous_issues/articles/1960/the_phd_viva_thrive_or_survive)

David Twigg draws on personal experience to give advice on preparing for the oral exam. He has also collected advice from five supervisors.

<http://www.sussex.ac.uk/Users/dt31/download/phdviva.pdf>

Dr Andrew Broad's *Nasty PhD Viva Questions* covers a lot more than difficult questions. This information-rich resource aims to help you prepare for and perform in your oral exam.

<http://www.geocities.com/andrewbroad/cs/cs710/viva.html>

Gordon Rugg and Marian Petre's *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research* has an extremely useful chapter that describes some of the general and specific questions that you are likely to be asked and outlines strategies for your responses. There is also a good chapter on oral presentation skills.

*For general advice on presentations skills:*

*Oral Presentation Skills* from The McGraw Center, Princeton University

[http://web.princeton.edu/sites/mcgraw/oral\\_presentation\\_skills.html](http://web.princeton.edu/sites/mcgraw/oral_presentation_skills.html)

Access resources from PolyU's Centre for Independent Language Learning (CILL) by going to *Presentations* on their index page. Start with the short video about confidence, energy and intonation.

<http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/cill/index.htm#P>

*(This work was funded by the Educational Development Centre and supported by the Research Office.)*