



*Original Research Article*

# Candidates' evaluation of the process of the PhD oral examination: Is it achieving its intended purpose?

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Abstract

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While the prestige of attaining the highest level of education is sought after, the process tends to be generally considered as unpleasant and dreaded by a number of candidates. It has also been noted that the whole process of the viva can be contradictory hence leaving the candidate frustrated and deflated. The aim of this research is to examine the candidates' valuation of the process of the viva in producing a credible candidate of the academic community. A phenomenological approach was employed using a small-scale action research. One to one interviews were used to collect research data in situ from the candidates after the viva in order to capture the very first impression of the experience. Candidates who had graduated previously provided valuable data of their experiences 2 to 5 years later. Observations of the state of the candidates during and after the viva captured important data. The research included a sample of 20 candidates in four (4) private universities and another 20 participants comprised those that had graduated two (2) to five (5) years earlier. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Candidates going through the viva process do so with minimum information of what is expected of them during the process. The different candidates' accounts demonstrated that the viva is an emotional labor that leaves candidates with high emotions, both negative and positive. Further, it has been concluded that the whole viva process is unclear, unfair and encumbered with contradictions and lack of transparency.

**Keywords:** PhD, Oral examination, Doctoral studies, Viva, Academic Community Team (ACT).

## INTRODUCTION

Morley *et al.* (2002, p.263-4), states that doctoral studies seem to emerge as mysterious and mystifying" and the assessment and examination process "secretive." While the prestige of attaining the highest level of education is sought after, the process tends to be generally considered as unpleasant and dreaded by a number of candidates. The viva process tends to miss the purpose of the exercise and emerges as a "fact finding mission" that is intimidating, frustrating and traumatizing for the candidates as confirmed by Kelly (2012). That tends to bring in subjectivity elements that may weigh more than the objectivity required of an assessment. Naseem *et al.* (2019) argues that the traditional viva lacks objectivity, reliability and validity, a stance this research shares. This

position includes the examiners who may equally be biased and may lack comprehensive evaluation of the topic under research (Naseem *et al.*, 2019). It has also been noted that the whole process of the viva can be contradictory hence leaving the candidate frustrated and deflated. Naseem *et al.*, insist that there could further be issues of monotony and repetition of questions by the panel of examiners hence, affecting the candidate and the essence of the assessment. As the highest qualification in academia, objectivity in assessment should be highly expected in order to achieve the purpose of the PhD programme and the oral assessment.

Traditionally, since a long time, the viva voce examination has been used to assess PhD candidates at

the end of their studies. Its purpose as argued by Crossourd (2010), “intends to hone one’s dialectical skills”. Overtaken by time, the creation of new knowledge within an accepted intellectual framework has emerged as crucial. Crossourd further explains that it is, *About internalizing and reproducing authoritative forms of expression and conduct, in rehearsals of established canons of knowledge ...the conduct of original research and the contribution of new knowledge to a field of enquiry (p. 4).*

Crossourd (2010) states that the viva has assessment implications so that the response of the candidate to the questions determines the candidate passing or failing. While it can be conducted in private before the examiners, vivas can also be conducted in public before different people as noted by Tinkler and Jackson (2004 and Crossourd (2010). Numerous research, such as ((Tinkler and Jackson, 2004; Ponnudhaliet al., 2016; Bhadre et al., 2016 and Naseem et al., 2019) has been conducted to assess the validity and reliability of the viva and results consistently point to its limitations. Unfortunately, no such research has been conducted in Zambia. This present study has set out to examine the candidate’s valuation of the process of the viva in producing a credible candidate to the academic community. The research focus is on the candidate.

Researchers such as, Tinkler and Jackson (2004), states that the viva is intended to check the level of understanding of the candidate and their oral skills which are crucial to this level. The researchers further state that the process acts as a ‘rite of passage’ or ‘ritual’. Ponnudhali et al. (2016) explains the viva as an oral assessment in which the candidate’s response is equally verbal as it is expressed by speech rather than in writing. Naseem et al. (2019) add that the viva is an assessment that tests the cognitive domain, the attitude, ethics and the communication skills of the candidate.

The purpose of the viva is crucial to this research. Kelly (2012) and Keystone (2021) argues that the viva is meant for the PhD candidate to provide clarification, authentication and to test the wider knowledge of their particular field. The assessment further tests the candidate’s ability to discuss their alertness, professional competences and their ability to defend ones’ works. This should include their capability to exploring new frontiers of knowledge as to take up new challenges. Shah (2013) and Bhadre et al., (2016) insist that the viva is an assessment that will test all levels of the candidate’s knowledge, subtle skills, proper attitude as well as their professional competences. Unfortunately, the viva has no valid and reliable questions prepared and set apart by the examiners to use during the process. The whole process is an unstructured oral assessment as confirmed by Bhadre et al. (2016) raising issues of transparency, ethics and equity as noted by Hartley and Fox (2004), Jackson and Tinkler (2000) and Davis and Engward (2018).

Crossouard (2011, pg.14) cites a respondent from her

paper on: *The doctoral viva voce as a cultural practice: the gendered production of academic subjects* who said the following about her viva:

*The mix of fantasy, fear, glamour, anxiety, impossibility and possibility are so pungent and powerful that it weighs down the experience like no other – questions about authenticity and pedagogies of respect and debate are very hard to rescue from the kind of freight which comes into the experience*

While the viva can test all levels of knowledge such as cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains, as alluded to by Bahdre et al., the process seems to be perceived as lacking the objectiveness befitting an assessment hence defeating its intended purpose. Such a position is supported by Kaur (2019) claiming that the viva examination tends to be associated with subjective bias hence, fails to meet the standards of parameters such as validity, reliability, and reproducibility.

The viva process can also be considered as a transition period from a mere candidate into a seasoned academician that is later accepted as a credible member of the ASC. The contributions of the examined dissertation to the existing body of knowledge, to current debates, or the contributions in terms of new theories, concepts and ideas are vital and should be demonstrated even during the viva sessions by the candidates. The level of authenticity should further be clarified to reinforce this in universities. Such a position is lacking in most Zambian Universities given the lack of research in this area.

Kiley et al. (2018) in their research on An Oral Component in PhD examination in Australia opines that “the oral component rarely, if ever rendered [a] substantially different result from the one reflecting the individual judgments already made, and/or agreed on by the examiner panel before. This brings out the objectivity and subjectivity of the whole examinations process. Candidates in Zambia are exposed to a panel of not more than ten (10) members. Of the ten, only two would be the examiners who would have had the opportunity to go through the document extensively and or the supervisors of the candidate. The rest additions to the panel, judge the candidate from the presentation made in 45 to 60 minutes. Crossourd (2010) presented the following response from a participant to demonstrate this scenario: *She kept sort of twisting the argument that I’d presented in the PhD and I couldn’t for the life of me understand where she was coming from and how she thought the evidence pointed in that direction, so I ended up having this rather convoluted exchange with her because I couldn’t see where she was coming from. (Christine)*

Such an explanation demonstrates how examiners can confuse the candidate during the viva. Bhadre et al. (2016) and Ponnudhali et al. (2016) argue that the viva can be dependent on the “whims” and personal prejudices of the examiners which can dilute its objectiveness as narrated by Christine above. Kaur et al.

(2012) comments of the unstructured nature of the viva stating that there is no guidance given to the panelist on the number of questions to ask. Kaur *et al.* (2012), further insist that the panelist may be biased and can be influenced in their judgment by the performance of the predecessor. The examiners can comprise of lenient and inflexible individuals who can be experienced and inexperienced, a social practiced encumbered with risks and uncertainties (Crossourd, 2010). This variation may not result in a balanced representation but may disadvantage the candidate. An assessment is a technical process that involves rational and objective measurement of a candidate's attainment or attributes as noted by Kiley and Mullins (2004), Kiley (2009) and Davis and Engward (2018). Inexperienced examiners who lack consistency in the questioning techniques and practice may disadvantage the candidate. Morley *et al.* (2002, pg. 269), also cited by Crossourd (2010) add that the viva is clad with "worrying fallibilities and potential for sex, race and other stereotyping and discrimination."

### The Zambian Situation

Zambia has seen a proliferation of institutions offering tertiary education in response to the growing demand associated with a growing youthful population. From one university in 1966 (the University of Zambia), Zambia currently has a total of nine (9) public and fifty-four (54) private registered universities by end of 2019 (HEA, 2019; Mwiya *et al.*, 2017). Such a scenario means an exponential growth in the number of doctoral candidates being offloaded on the market. The prerequisites for a university to offer doctoral programmes are clearly documented by the regulatory board, Higher Education Authority (HEA). Crucial, is the research activities of the university, its innovation, an extensive library, and the qualified staff at both doctoral and professorial level.

Generally, Zambia has a collectivist culture that predisposes individuals to assume responsibility for the well-being of others as supported by Hofstede, (2011). Further still, and as confirmed by Mwiya *et al.* (2017), Zambia has high power distance (Hofstede, 2011), that does not question authority. Those with higher qualifications are assumed a community of authority and their authority may not be questioned. Such a disposition tends to elevate the examiner's panel to high level of order that demands respect and what they say unquestioned. Additionally, this cultural department presented by Hofstede (2011), may have an impact on how individuals evaluate service quality elements (Mwiya *et al.* 2017) and further affect the validity and subjectivity of the assessment process. Davis and Engward (2018) raised the issue of power of examiners. Though an unexplored facet in viva, it is an issue of concern in the Zambian situation given the cultural inclination.

Mwiya *et al.* (2017) argue that universities are

intended for knowledge creation, utilising and sharing. Such a submission is vital, given the significance of education in any country. The recipients of the qualifications are assumed, equipped, enriched, and their knowledge base widened so that they can contribute to the social and economic development of the country. Mwiya *et al.* further confirm how highly skilled, creative, innovative and professional the users should emerge after the PhD. The PhD graduates are crucial to the economic development of the country given the prototypes they would have laboured for years to create, innovate and develop and finally defend at a viva assessment. The objectivity of an assessment underpins its quality and relevance which is underpinned by the nature of the examining panel: the credibility of the internal and external examiners, their engagement and involvement in research activities, their familiarity with the field of research under assessment (Lindsay *et al.*, 2002). How refined the expert knowledge structure is like of the examining panelists is crucial to the outcome. While Lindsay *et al.*, focused on the lecturer in a classroom observation, a PhD examiner is not exempt. The basis of their ability to assess the candidate is grounded in their broadened and enhanced knowledge base.

### The PhD Candidate

The reason to undertake the PhD programme differs from candidate to candidate. For some it is for the product (certification), (Kelly, 2012) and personal development (Leonard *et al.*, 2005). However, the PhD graduate is crucial to the development of any nation. While the PhD's research advances the field being studied with specialized knowledge, the candidate is expected to acquire transferable skills such as "problem solving, critical reasoning, thinking in-depth and from different angles and perspectives" Tzanakou (2014). The research is expected to be original research contributes original philosophies, knowledge, theories and concepts. Such contributions are crucial to the development of the nation and hence should not rust on university shelves. As noted by Tzanakou, the candidate is expected to acquire different skills during the research process that should equip him/her for future roles. Of the noted skills expected of the PhD candidate to acquire, presentation and communication skills are equally important. Kiley *et al.* (2018) argues that the candidate should have communication skills to enable them to cogently defend the originality of their research. Such skills are expected to have been acquired during conferences, attended and participated in during the programme. An effective communicator is capable of disseminating their research ideas and results to the Academic Scientific Community (ASC) and the general public.

Faknle *et al.* (2019), argue that academic conferences at both domestic and international level, are a learning

spot for doctoral candidates. The gains includes, meeting peers and professionals in their field, testing their new ideas in order to receive critical and innovative responses, receiving practical advice and ability to overcome their fears (Lorand, 2021). While there are different kinds of PhD programmes, such as taught and by research, the skills, such as communication, presentation, writing, critical analysis etc. remain crucial to the candidates.

How equipped the candidate is for the viva is not very clear. A number of documents reviewed from different universities shows well documented processes of the whole process of research with little information on the actual viva (Ibid, 2020). Experiences of previous candidates seem to inform others a situation that is capable to conjure different feelings in the candidate awaiting the assessment as confirmed by Murray and Moore (2006) Davis and Engward (2018). Ponnudhali *et al.* (2016) postulates that the viva can at times be a frightening experience for the candidates. Such a state can be as a result of inadequate, fragmented information and or due to lack of adequate preparation. Keystone (2021) and Hartley and Fox, (2004) posit that a mock viva is necessary to help a candidate practice answers in advance. The comfort of any candidate during an examination process cannot be understated. Kaur *et al.* (2019) argue that the candidate should be comfortable and should not feel threatened if they can give their best. The aim of this research is to examine the candidate's valuation of the process of the viva in producing a credible candidate of the academic community.

## Research Questions

The research was guided by the following research questions:

What are the candidates' observations of the viva process?

What were the candidates' expectations of what was being tested during the viva?

What were candidates' impression of the examiners and their role during the viva?

What are candidates' views on the reason behind the viva?

## The theory

The current research is grounded in Arnold Van Gennep's theory of rite of passage. Van Gennep (1960), a Dutch anthropologist presented a series of passages; from birth to death, from membership in one group to another. To optimise on his notion of the series of passage, Van Gennep identified three phases, namely: *separation*, *transition* and *incorporation* and declared these three phases to constitute a universal pattern. These three

phases are used to demonstrate the main phases that a PhD candidate may go through. These three phases include the proposal level, conducting and writing the dissertation and finally the viva process. We discuss in brief the three phases to help provide a contextual understanding and explain the relationship among the three but emphasis will be on the last phase, '*incorporation*' because of its relevance to the viva process that can be considered as the rite of passage for their incorporation into the Academic scientific community. In this research, the PhD candidate is considered as a member of one group transiting into another group. Using Van Gennep's theory, the process of the viva is premised as the rite of passage through which the PhD candidate is tested to pass from one stage into another stage. To assimilate one into the Academic Scientific Community, knowledge, competences and ability to defend relevancy and originality of the works is tested.

The candidate passes through the phase of *separation*, a crucial phase that represent a fundamental shift in the way PhD candidates construct their daily lives in an attempt to fit in and create a sense of belonging. This commences with the proposal level that can be heart wrenching as some candidates tend to fail to enter the second phase of writing (Tinto, 1987). Moving from the *separation* stage, is the *Transition* phase which, describes a process of letting go of the ways and behavior of the past in order to learn new ways which are appropriate to the new environment (Van Gennep, 1960; Tinto, 1987). Tinto (1987) argues that the process of separation from the past can be applied to new students who have yet to acquire the norms and patterns of behaviour appropriate to incorporation into the new expectation of the PhD candidate. This means discipline, commitment, a high level of professionalism. At this point PhD students receive a lot of advice from colleagues, peers, supervisors, other lecturers on the process of conducting the research. Such wisdom may lack ontological value and is relative, but may not be relatable.

Incorporation is crucial to the PhD candidate. It can be argued that some students are rarely provided with the relevant rituals and ceremonies that could prepare them to deal with the incorporation process (Van Gennep, 1960). Although students may be given the guide to writing a PhD dissertation, they are still left to fumble their way through the maze of what the viva is and its expectation. As indicated above, the lack of ontological value in the wisdom received during transition could leave the candidate unstable and confused. The viva may not be pragmatic enough to facilitate the smooth integration of the PhD candidate given its unstructured nature, thus leading to feelings of dejection. PhD candidates are prone to feelings of loneliness as argued by Brown (2021). He cites a candidate who claimed to have been lonely due to lack of support systems. The state of the candidate during transition is

important. However the three phases are interconnected and should be viewed as an all-inclusive stage that prepare PhD candidates adequately to transit into the ASC.

## METHODOLOGY

The research used an inductive study with an intention to provide rich, holistic and real data as confirmed by Sikes, (2004). An interpretive design that used an action research approach used to inquire from participants as they evaluate the viva process in order to inform and improve or influence practice (Sagor, 2000; Koshy *et al.*, 2010 and Koshy, 2010). The viva process emerged as a data rich environment and data was collected in situ. Hence, as provided by Koshy *et al.* (2010) and Koshy (2010), the use of action research involves action, evaluation and critical reflection which should lead to change or improvement in personal or professional practice. To avoid reliance on one source of data, this study commenced with observations of 20 participants during the viva process and later engaged them in one-to-one interviews as supported by (Cohen *et al.*, 2000; Sagor, 2000 and Lofland *et al.*, 2006). The research included a total sample of 40 participants purposively selected from 4 purposively selected universities. The selection was based on the private universities that have graduated PhD candidates in the last 10 years, had their programmes accredited by the Higher Education Authority of Zambia. The one to one interviews only lasted 30 minutes given that the participants were already exhausted from the viva. During the interviews, participants confirmed or refuted data collected during the observation period. Participants who refused to be interviewed were left out and replaced right away with those who were willing. The whole process lasted a whole complete year. Of the 40 participants, 20 had had their viva 2 to 5 years earlier.

Focus group interviews with 20 participants, who had gone through the viva 2 to 5 years earlier were conducted. Two groups were created to reduce the number. The focus groups were carried out in order to compare the results with participants who had just undergone the viva. These were equally purposively selected, for their knowledge. These candidates equally came from the same private universities. This further helped verify the responses of the initial participants. The names of the universities and the participants have not been exposed in this document to uphold the ethical requirements. Thematic analysis was used to assess the participant's valuation of the process of the viva in producing credible candidates.

## FINDINGS

The candidate's populations are represented by the

following pseudo names as captured in the table below. There will be two categories of participants. 'Category new' will capture the candidates that had just gone through their viva. 'Category old' will represent older participants who had done their viva 2 to 5 years earlier. The letter before the digit will represent the pseudo name of the private university. For the 'Category old' representing older candidates, will have the letter "D" to their code.

The research questions will be used for structuring this section. The voices of the participant are provided accordingly and coupled with data from observations. The voices are presented in italics and will be indented so they stand out.

The researchers capture the voices of the participants. However, similar responses were all not captured here, in an effort to avoid making the document bulky. The gender of the participants and the examiners is not captured to avoid focus on gender because it is not of interest to this research.

### What are the candidates' observations of the viva process?

"What is your overall observation of this process? I asked,

*"This is the worst experience of my life"***O5 said sitting down.** *"I never thought it would be like this. Anyway, fisangaabaume"***(a local language [Bemba] adage meaning, hard things are meant for strong men).** **O5 laughed while sipping some water from a bottle.** *"The whole process was good and educative. I have learnt some things my supervisors did not capture. However, however, O5 repeated himself, "why was it so tense? Why make it feel like I committed an offence when I am a student and still learning?"* [O5].

*"The process is intimidating madam. It is an interrogation instead of an examination. Twelve (12) examiners madam! Why? Those examiners make a good process feel so wrong. They were aggressive with me. I thought this is an examination?"* [G5]

*"I didn't like the process. It was humiliating. My confidence was gone right at the beginning. I witnessed my friend go through it earlier. It was not good. It made me feel like all I have done the past three years was rubbish. This exam process is intimidating. One examiner did not even know what they were asking me about".*

**Counting, B2 started,** *"1. The panelist has not read my document, 2. Is not my examiner 3. I know their field is not HRM. Lastly, why was the panelist allowed to examine me?"* **Sitting up, B2 concluded,** *for that I think the process was wrong" [B2].*

*"I liked it though it was tense. It was an examination. I know some of those examiners, they have nothing to do with my topic or programme of study. So why were they allowed to ask me questions?" [B3].*

Table 1. Participants Pseudo Codes.

	University Name	Category [New]		Category [Old]	
		Candidates	Candidates Code	Older candidates	
1	Orange	5	O1 to O5	5	O1D to O5D
2	Red	5	R1 to R5	5	R1D to R5D
3	Blue	5	B1 to B5	5	B1D to B5D
4	Green	5	G1 to G5	5	G1D to G5D
<b>Total</b>		<b>20</b>		<b>20</b>	

*"This process was tough. I don't think it is wrong. If that is how it is supposed to be. I have learnt to be tough. I just think there were too many examiners against one student. I appreciate other students but why allow them to ask me questions, because this is an exam? Or is it for a students to be exposed academically, mentally, psychologically and all? Ukukanicaumuntupacintubwingu "(meaning: being hanged in public or disgraced)[R5].*

*"It's been five years since my viva and I have had the privilege of being asked to examine a PhD., I still have not understood the theatrics that goes on in the viva. My personal observation is that the process does not represent an examination. It tends to assume an interrogative nature rather than an assessment. Some examiners or panelist are subjective. It is like they do not want the candidate to go through"[G3D].*

*"The whole process is a show off of examiners, my supervisors sat there not knowing what to say. They were stopped each time they tried to clarify some issues. I felt like I was at an academic slaughter house. His friends laughed. I mean it. I was slaughtered. My learnt knowledge failed me, yes I think so.'R4D laughed. "When I was called in and told, 'you have passed with major amendments'. I did not say anything, I did not react, I was numb. What? I kept asking myself. That is all I heard. When my supervisors walked over to congratulate me, I broke down."[R4D].*

*"I graduated 2 years ago. When I hear there is a viva, I ask to attend. It has not changed. Someone who has not read the document, becomes so judgmental despite being referred to the document, they keep insisting. Some questions are bad. And the panel contradicts itself. You cannot use this research design, you should have used this one. Another one comes in and says. The research design is good but why did you not include the hypotheses. Another one picks it up and says, there is no need for the hypothesis here. Another one goes, why did you use a qualitative approach, you are a PhD student. You should have used a quantitative approach. Oh my goodness!"B2D exclaimed as she covered her face [B2D].*

### What were the students' expectations of what was being tested during the viva?

The participant's expectation of the viva was not sharply

defined. This is clear due to information. Participants claimed they were not fully prepared for the viva assessment and later on not too sure they knew what was being tested. While some indicated that their supervisors helped them with the PowerPoint presentation (A 45minutes to 1 hour presentation summing up the whole dissertation) for the viva, however, not much was explained of the expectation of the viva. Observations revealed the candidates seemed to assume, assessment surrounded their PowerPoint presentation of their work. All they rhetorically pursued was capturing the whole process of research on some slides that amounted to even 60, over loaded with information. The candidates were not sure the type of knowledge, skills etc. being tested. When the participants were asked if they knew the type and focus of the questions, their response was:

*"If there was a past paper that demonstrated the type of questions that would be asked, I think that would have been better."At this level? I asked. "Oh yes, I would have prepared myself. But, it is this thing of going in, with 'eyes wide open only', and not sure of what to expect. I did not know what kind of knowledge they would be asking for. All I was told was to prepare a power point presentation. Honestly even what the panelist asked me, I don't know if I can classify it under a particular knowledge. At the moment I am confused."R1 concluded sounding confused [R1].*

*"Dr.," addressing me, "you saw and heard what those people were asking, what skills did they want to assess in me or from my work? Only one asked me as to what new knowledge I was contributing to the existing body of knowledge. The rest seemed like judges interrogating me"[B3].*

*"They should tabulate in a particular way what exactly will be tested. If they say they will test a) Knowledge and understanding, b) Critical skills, c) Presentation skills and so forth and so on, I would have known what I was walking into. But what I knew was that the viva is to assess authenticity of the work done. At least, that is what my supervisor told me. I think I have done that"[R4].*

The focus group interview, of the older students confirmed the responses of the other category of students.

*"If I remember the questions I was asked. They were on, if I got the statement of the problem right, the objectives, conceptual framework and checking on the*

methodology if correct. They further checked if the findings revealed what the objectives set out to establish"[O3D].

"That is the knowledge they are checking,"B1D said, correcting O3D."They are checking what knowledge you have in all these issues. So each knowledge, the practical part is the writing process and conducting the research"[B1D].

But,interjected R4D, "why not structure this, I mean, I don't know now how to put it across. I have sat in a number of vivas since mine, and I tend to be confused still on what is being assessed. This examiner asks this, another one says the other thing. Those examiners who have not read the document are even confused and confusing. Some candidates are even so lucky that questions asked are a 'walk in the park', I mean very simple"[R4D].

"To objectively answer your question Dr.,"addressing me, "it is not clear to the candidate what exactly is being tested, or later alone examined. It should be clear from the onset. A PhD is not like a written exam, we agree, but there must be clarity and a known structure as to what will be examined. A candidate cannot be left at the mercy of examiners. Some are lenient, others hard core, yet still, you have sadists, who do not want others to excel"[G5D].

### What were your impressions of the examiners and their role during the viva?

This research question provided a variety of responses which dovetailed the other questions. This emerged from the responses of the participants:

"I do not know what their real role is to say the least. I am in a confused state madam." **Your impression, I probed.**"Oh okay. I think it is to examine my research."**Did they do that satisfactorily?** I asked. "I am sure they think so. It is their job."**You do not think so? I probed further.** "It is confusing Dr., I do not think so,"**why?**, I probed on. "Because of the intensity. I think I have failed. **B2 clasped hands.**" {Silence for 2 minutes}. "I would have cried. But I cannot. I have to be strong."**B2 said and sat up.** "Haa!"**B2 exclaimed,** "this is humiliating to say the least. They have done their job of humiliating me, I end here."**B2 was excused from further questioning** [B2].

"Tell me what their role is, I do not know at the moment."**Your impression?, I probed.**"They were examining my document. That is my impression. **Did they play their role?, I asked.**Tell me what their role is?"**O4 asked me.** I am asking you in the capacity of a participant. "Woooh! I guess so. I can only wait for my results"[O4].

"Our powerful culture still wormed itself into the viva,

Dr. I was not given time to clarify myself, which I thought is part of the viva. I am angry. I heard, "I am talking, you listen and take notes." Another one told me not to be argumentative. The chair of the viva also warned me to respect the examiners and not to interject. Defending myself is not failure to respect the examiners, is it? I respect them, though some of them are my age mates but they have a role to examine me. **R5 looks at me. Before I can answer, R5 continues.** I prepared to defend my research but the -"authority of the examiners was not able to allow me. I feel bad" [R5].

"I am confused at the moment. Those guys in there know how to finish someone. Eeeee!, is that an examination? Look at my mouth."**G5 was pointing to the mouth which was covered with white dry saliva on the corners of the lips.** "My mouth is dry. I could not even drink my water. Psychologically, and mentally tried and tested, I should say. Like I said, earlier on, these examiners know how to make a good process bad. I am not saying it should have been easy sailing but at least act like humans"[G5].

The participants noted this:

"I have been at this university for so long. I did my masters here and thought of progressing to a PhD During my masters, our methodology Lecturer invited us to attend the viva. I felt sorry for the students but thought they had not done their job. I know all those panelists. How can some of them even dare ask me questions when they have nothing to do with the education field? I saw lawyers, business lecturers, not experienced with the education field. So, you ask my impression of these examiners in there, I do not know. Period" [R5].

"It is an experience to remember. The examiner's role is crucial and being firm can be construed as intimidating. I did not understand when I went through the process. In fact, I thought those examiners were evil. But I have been on the panel twice since. The role is to examine. It is how it is done"[G1D].

"In my opinion, I think it is an abused role. The examiners tend to assume this aura around them that make them think they are super humans. I think they forget their experience, mmm,"**G3D looks at G1D,** "and turn the whole process into a payback process with a wrong individual all together"[G3D].

"I don't think so,"**interjected G1D,** "it is because you are the one being examined. But I agree with you, it is intimidating. I felt the same. I could not sleep that night, in fact the whole week. It was an exhausting process. Even though I passed, I could not rejoice"[G1D].

"The role of the examiners is to test the candidate on how they had carried out their research and finally documented their whole process. It is to check the genuineness of the whole process. It is an academic exercise gone wrong. I think so."[O3D].

### What do you understand, to be the reasoning behind carrying-out of the viva?

The student's responses were not so much different from the above responses. The only different responses were the ones below from both the *old and new category*. The *older category* could have had time to reflect on the purpose of the viva.

*"The purposes for conducting the viva is important. I understand it as assessment that should assess the candidate as objectively as any exam. What do I mean, it is to verify the work done. Did I do it according to the stipulations? You should understand that my response is based on my experience in there just now. But I am right? I do not know"* [O5].

*"It is an initiation ceremony. I felt grown up after."* **Smiles.** *"I felt like that at the graduation ceremony when I was being dressed up. Then I was proud that I went through the fire and made it."* **G3D laughs uncontrollable as the rest of the members joined in.** *"I was happy to be admitted and could not wait to sit on a panel as an examiner too. I was qualified...Dr. ..."* **Laughs again** [G3D].

*"It is an intellectual initiation ceremony, I agree with G3D. Examiners should be intellectually examining the level of the learnt knowledge, skills and relate them to the programme of study. I agree, the purpose is to admit the candidate to academic intellectualism. So they grill you, and when proved ready, according to the examiners, then you are admitted. My experience determines why I think the viva is carried out but should it be that grueling to prove its relevance?"* [B2D].

*"I agree with G3D and B2D, the reason behind the important process am sure should have been to assess my contributions to the body of knowledge. There is a seasoned Professor I like (named the Professor), who refers to it as the frontiers of knowledge"* [R4D].

*"Now I know that it is about communicating my learned knowledge, and skills effectively to these supposedly gurus."* **Why do you say, supposedly? I ask.** *"Because, very few were gurus in my field. Some of them were in Law, others in Education. I am in Human Resource Management. I don't think those examiners had to examine me. They should have been silent spectators until their law candidate's turn"* [R1].

*"I read an article right after my viva to assess the role of the examiner. Unfortunately, I can't cite it but it said something like 'examiners are there to assess the weaknesses and strengthens of the research conducted by the student.' Maybe that is why they are so tough and do not tolerate any simple response."* **G1D smiled as looking at the fellow participants who did not look pleased with the response** [G1D].

*"Reduce the number of panelists. Too many are intimidating. Mmm, bamukolwengabafula, ubushikutabuchabwangu, (A local language [Bemba] proverb synonymous with "too many cooks spoil the broth") especially those not in the field of the student's*

*work. It is not for anyone wanting to pass time or wanting to observe a student under pressure to come and attend"* [B2D].

*"Structure the whole process by having questions that relate to someone's research. If the viva is an examination, it should be treated as such."* [G1].

*"Prepare candidates adequately. How this can be done, I do not know but please we need to know and we need to be adequately prepared. I am sure some students fail not because their research was rubbish but because of preparation and not knowing how to answer. That would improve our confidence levels"* [R4D].

*"The panelist should have a human heart. Students are humans simply trying to upgrade themselves. Students are not judges to shout us down like small children. Some of us are doing even better jobs than them. They should act professionally"* [R5D].

### Observation Results

During the viva, the candidates emerged ready and equipped for the exercise. Each of the new category demonstrated eagerness to present and defend their work. The presentation were well conducted with a few disruptions from the chairperson cautioning some of the students from reading the power point presentation or on time keeping.

The interrogation would sometimes assume a cross examination process. Some panelist were harsh in their questioning. The different members on the panels were from different universities and it was clear that the framework and concepts the candidates used did not agree with all the panelists and sometimes even with the external examiners. The candidates were at pain justifying the use of some concepts. At one university, panelists differed in the presence of the candidates which affected the candidate presenting greatly.

A repetition of questions was observed, which made it difficult for candidates to respond. At one university, some members of the panel comprised members who had not supervised or examined a PhD candidate before. Their questioning techniques demonstrated their inexperience and competence.

Except from one university, all had about 10 to more members on the panel. This number included the external examiners, internal examiners, supervisors and invited panelists. PhD students working on their thesis and MBAs and MA's were invited to attend the presentation.

### DISCUSSION

#### What are the students' observations of the viva process?

It was clear the students appreciated the purpose of the process and were able to say it was a learning phase.



However, they opined that number of examiners present during the viva was unfair who also according to the students should not have been allowed to participate because of their irrelevant field of specialty.

The responses of the participants confirm the findings of previous research conducted by Bhadre *et al.* (2016), Naseem *et al.* (2019) and other scholars such as by Kelly (2012), who claim that the exercise of the viva tend to be like “fact finding mission” hence ends up intimidating, frustrating and traumatizing. The whole process is an unstructured oral assessment as alluded to by Bhadre *et al.* (2016) and confirmed by the narrative from the participants above. The contradictory position of the panel demonstrates further how some panel members may not be suited for the role as will be discussed later under research question 3. Examiners are chosen for their specialty, knowledge and experience. To delegate this important role to any attendee to the viva is an issue of concern.

The responses of the participants dovetailed as the participants responded. Their experiences were captured as they narrated on their observation of the viva process. The experiences were noted as intimidating, frustrating and stressful as noted by Kelly (2012). The older category of the participants seemed to remember their ordeal as of yesterday even after five years. They were still able to remember the process as intimidating, frustrating and traumatizing despite the years that had passed. It had become a lived experience this demonstrates how traumatized some students can be. Observed during the focus group interview is the strain on the faces of the participants as they narrated their ordeal. The participants complained at the overwhelming manner in which questions were asked by the examiners. Multiple questions were asked one after the other, meaning one could not assimilate all of them, neither could one answer all the questions adequately in the time allocated with the examiners.

### **What were the students’ expectations of what was being tested during the viva?**

The responses from the old category demonstrate the lack of clarity as to what is being examined during the viva. Candidates do not seem to be informed of the expectations of the viva. The aspect of authenticity stood out. Naseem *et al.* (2019) demonstrate that the viva tests the cognitive domain, the attitude, ethics and the communication skills of the candidate. Such important issues should be availed to the candidates so that they prepare themselves adequately.

The old category responses confirm the new category candidates. While, others demonstrated a bit of knowledge, it remains clear that there is need to clear with the candidates with what is exactly being tested. Shah (2013) and Bhadre *et al.* (2016) demonstrates that

the viva should assess all levels of the candidate’s knowledge, subtle skills, proper attitude as well as their professional competences.

Leaving students at the mercy of examiners is not fair given the issues of leniency severe and stringent nature of some examiners. This confirms the assertion of Kaur *et al.* (2012), who argued that the panelist may be biased and capable of presenting a lenient or severe and inflexible tendency during the assessment process. The new category did in most cases confused not understand exactly what had just happened. The older category, had had time to reflect on the process, however their responses did not differ much with the new category.

### **What were your impressions of the examiners and their role during the viva?**

The new category’s responses were more emotive than the old category. The responses echoed Bhadre *et al.*, (2016) and Ponnudhali *et al.* (2016) who argued that the viva is dependent on the “whims” and personal prejudices of the examiners. The cultural dimension of power distance as discussed by Hofstede ((2011) is raised by R5. Davis and Engward (2018) equally noted the facet of the power of examiners. Cultural expectations are strictly expected in Zambia. The power structure is clear. One in authority commands so much power just as one with higher qualifications. In this context, the panel is an authority that students should respect and hence, how one speaks back or defends can be construed as disrespectful. A candidate defending critically could be misunderstood as being disrespectful. Additionally, the students raised concerns on the experiences of the panelists. Such a position is raised by Crossourd (2010) and Davis and Engward (2018) stating that the examiners should be experienced and consistent in their questioning techniques without which could affect the candidates. Panelists are part of the examining team too. Observation results showed that the live viva noted panelist being assigned score sheets. Issues of subjectivity raised by the students are confirmed by Tinkler and Jackson, 2004; Ponnudhali *et al.*, 2016; Bhadre *et al.*, 2016 and Naseem *et al.*, 2019) who concluded that the validity and reliability of the viva and results consistently point to its limitations. Hence, the candidates impressions of the examiners and the role played during the viva is confirmed as ambiguous comprising both inexperienced and experienced examiners a position that can affect the candidates overall results.

### **What do you understand, to be the reason behind carrying-out of the viva?**

The participant’s response confirms the theory that guided this research. The initiation principle which was

also raised by Tinkler and Jackson (2004), claimed the viva acts as a 'rite of passage' or 'ritual'. Van Genep's (1960) three transition phases, especially the *incorporation* is confirmed by the participants here. The transition stage emerges as crucial as the initiators (the examiners) seem to have glaring imperfections. This is confirmed by Morley *et al.* (2002, pg. 269) stating that they seem to have "worrying fallibilities...". This demonstrates that the whole process of the viva is misunderstood or is abused by the examiners according to the candidates hence, distorting the purpose of the viva. As a rite of passage, the panelists (gate keepers) have the authority to reject or accept some. It is the role of the gate keepers to assess. However, their broadened knowledge, attitudes, experience and specialty are crucial to enable them determine who enters. Such a role according to the candidates is crucial. Kaur (2019) articulated on this stating that the viva tends to be associated with subjective bias hence, fails to meet the standards of parameters such as validity, reliability, and reproducibility. Such noted concerns question the purpose of the viva.

## CONCLUSION

The current research set out to examine the nature of the viva from the perspective of the student. Action research was employed to evaluate the student's responses of the process through their experiences and perceptions. The results demonstrated that candidates going through the viva process do so with minimum information of what is expected of them during the process. The range of what is being tested should be clear to the candidate to enable them prepare adequately for the viva. Initial preparation with the supervisor or the practice of a mini or mock viva would somehow help the candidates. In conclusion, the different students' accounts demonstrated that the viva is an emotional labor that leaves students with high emotions. Further, it has been concluded that the whole viva process is unclear, unfair and encumbered with contradictions and lack of transparency. Its unstructured nature questions its very objectivity raising questions of high subjectivity.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The research recommends that the appointed examiners for each panel are credibly appointed by assessing their professional field, experience, ability and potential to examine PhD. Further still, the internal and external examiners be the ones that prescribe the main potential questions that can be shared with the rest of panelist to improve the structure of the process. Additionally, the mini/mock vivas are encouraged to provide a preparatory platform for the candidates before the main viva. Lastly,

PhD students must be engaged in research conferences, so that they can practice their presentation, communication, and critical analytical skills.

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