

Moving to Viva Voce in Australia



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Current system at UWA

- Thesis sent to three external examiners
- Reports received and assessed by member of GRS Board to determine classification:
 - Pass no corrections; Pass minor revisions; Pass major revisions; Revise and Resubmit; Fail
- Reports circulated to student, supervisor, PGC
- Thesis revised and student passed.

Concerns

- Is the thesis primarily the work of the student?
 - Thesis with publications
 - Overbearing supervisor input
- Does the student understand what they have done?
- Can they defend their conclusions?
- Has the examiner actually read the thesis?
- Can take many months to complete

What is it?

- Viva voce (live voice), also known as thesis defence, is the final stop on the PhD journey
- Common in most countries except Australia
- Format varies:
 - Formal public event
 - Small private event, sometimes includes supervisors
 - Seminar prior to submission or on the day
 - No seminar

Approval at UWA

- Discuss at supervisor training events
 - Who was in favour
- Board of the Graduate Research School convened small group to assess feasibility
 - What kind of model might work
- Communication and information
 - Information and feedback sessions
- Academic Board approval

Concerns raised

- What would be the value?
- Who would pay?
 - If examiners there in person, who would pay?
- Would examiners come?
 - It's a long way, would examiners want to do it?
- What about international students?
 - Would be expensive to come back to Australia
 - Might put international students off coming to UWA

Response

- What would be the value?
 - Assess the candidate's understanding of and contribution to the thesis
 - Tests ability to defend their work
 - Is a natural end point to the PhD journey
 - Improve student experience
 - Faster time from submission to final classification
 - Enhance the reputation of the institution
 - Address concerns raised in 2016 ACOLA Review

Response

- Who would pay?
 - If examiners there in person, who would pay?
 - Cost of travel and accommodation from central funds
 - Financial burden offset by enhancement to student experience and university reputation
- What about international students?
 - Would be expensive to come back to Australia
 - Might put international students off coming to UWA
 - Shorter time between submission and viva
 - Students expected to be present for the viva, although in exceptional cases could come in via videoconference

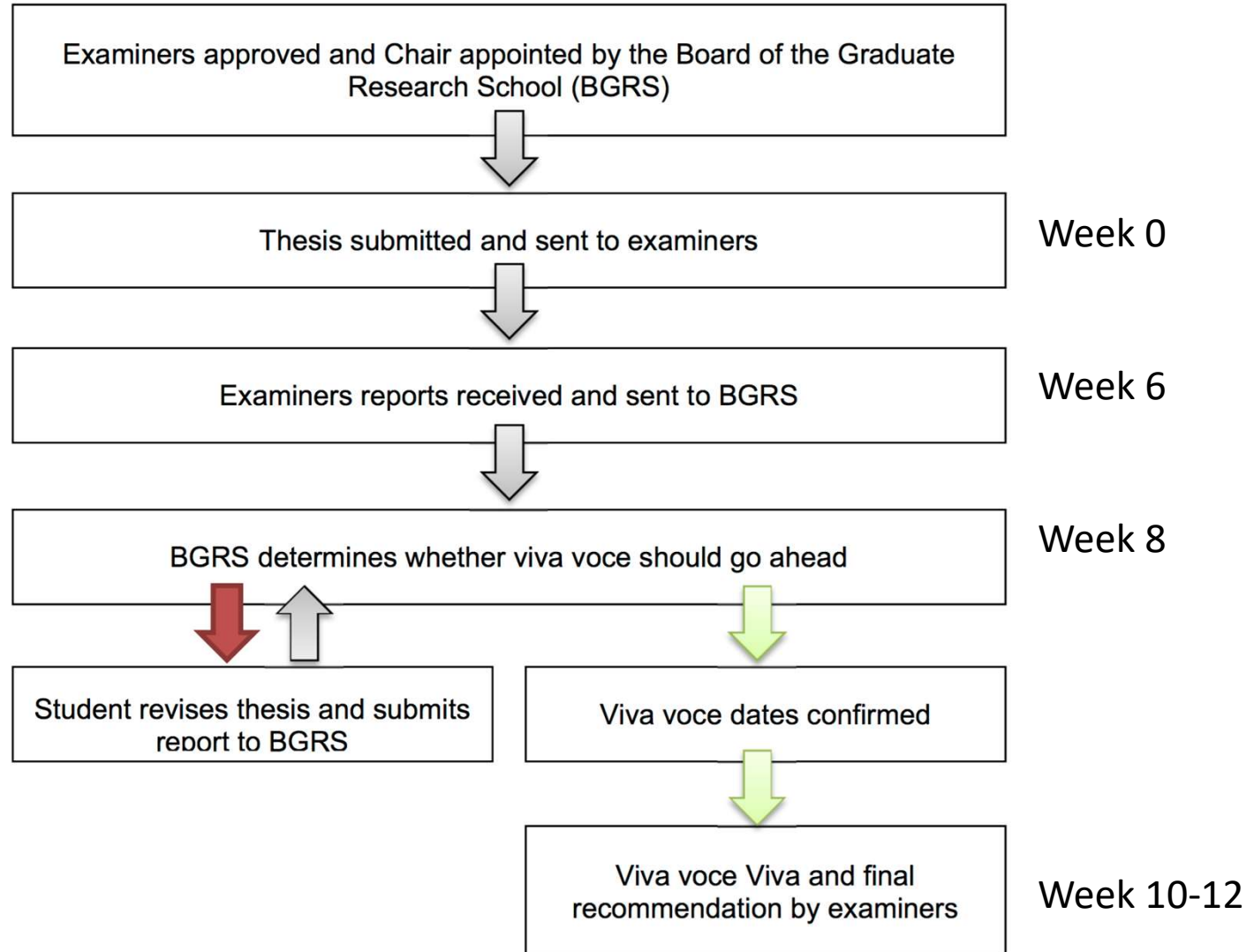
Response

- Would examiners come?
 - It's a long way, would examiners want to do it?
- Attendance: Survey of 2016 examiners:
 - Would you have accepted invitation to examine if
 - (a) you were expected to attend in person; or
 - (b) you were expected to attend via teleconference
 - 930 examiners contacted, ~650 responses
 - (a) 72% yes: 23% no: 5% maybe
 - (b) 89% yes: 9% no: 2% maybe
 - No to both: 2.5% (16)

Developing the process

- Looked at models in UK, New Zealand, especially University of Auckland
- Two stage examination process
- Stage 1
 - Two external examiners appointed
 - Thesis sent out and reports received prior to viva
 - Reports circulated to student and supervisor
 - GRS Board approves classification
- Stage 2
 - Examiners attending in person or via videoconference
 - Viva to be chaired by senior UWA academic
 - Supervisors not present

At UWA



Making it work

- Pilot of first student in 2017
- Compulsory for all PhD students enrolling from 1 January 2018
- Students enrolled before this can elect to have viva
- Feedback from examiners, students, supervisors taken on board to improve system
- Online information available

Making it work

- Candidate preparation: information, training, mock vivas
- Admin support to coordinate
- Training and information for supervisors
- Induction sessions for Chairs

Problems

- Culture change
- Engaging supervisors
- Locations - mostly use Library
- Videoconference – time zones

- To date:
 - 48 students have elected to take viva
 - 37 Domestic; 11 International
 - 26 Science; 6 EMS; 6HMS; 10 ABLE
 - 36% examiners from within Australia
 - 44% examiners attend in person
- Going forward:
 - Dedicated rooms for viva
 - Appointment and training of Chairs
 - Should all vivas be recorded?

Student Feedback

- Overall, I found the viva voce to be challenging but very rewarding. One of the main highlights was that my two reviewers gave me a lot of nice compliments on my thesis during the viva, which balanced out some of the more general "constructive criticism" that they had originally provided in their written reviews.
- I thought it was a fantastic experience, there were some technical difficulties as both Examiners were in different time zones and one arrived 30minutes late which was stressful, but the Chair was lovely and eased my tension. It was an excellent opportunity for me to appreciate the scope, depth and my contribution to the field.

Thanks

Any questions?