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Reflective Note

PhD Progress and Transfer Vivas at Universities in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

At the start of the PhD journey everything is new for the postgraduate student. There will be a whole array of regulations from the university to become familiar with, at the same time as getting familiar with your supervisors and learning to work with fellow postgraduate students and starting to do the actual PhD work. Finding out how and when the university assesses progress is often far down the list of priorities for a new PhD student. We argue that it is important to know the rules around progress and transfer assessment, since these regulations, and the expectations of what the student should produce, may vary between universities and even between faculties. The paper concludes with a set of recommendations for students, supervisors and universities to consider.

Keywords: transfer viva, PhD Research, transfer assessment, universities

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Introduction

At some stage in most PhD journeys, the university formally assesses the progress of the postgraduate student. In the UK (United Kingdom) there are typically two assessment points during the PhD journey and a third final examination, the viva voce at the end. The first is usually quoted early on to ensure that the student is making good initial progress, and it is often called the progress viva, which at most UK universities is really taking stock of the student's ideas and work to date.

The second review often comes at or just before the midway point. This examination process has different names at different universities, it can be called: the progress viva, transfer assessment, upgrade viva, first progression review, confirmation review, PhD upgrade, PhD transfer, Intermediate Assessment of Doctoral Candidates, or major review. The word transfer refers to the transferring from registration as an MPhil student to that of a PhD student. It is worth noting that at most UK universities PhD students are initially registered as 'provisional' doctoral candidates, or as MPhil/PhD students. This assessment is intended to identify whether the students and their research projects are (potentially) of doctoral level.

For universities worrying about PhD completion rates, it is also an assessment of whether submission of the PhD thesis within a reasonable time is realistic. Despite these common touchpoints, Dowle (2023) noted that there is little research into how much these reviews impact the progress or completion rates of doctoral students. From a more positive supportive perspective, the progress viva can identify struggling students at an early stage when remedial action can still be taken. In some universities, this is called the transfer viva, the point where the student officially transferred from being a Master's student to officially becoming a PhD student. The important thing is that it is an examination with serious consequences as it can stop the student doing a PhD and thereby affecting one's long-term career.

The 'major review' is an important step on a PhD student's journey, a key part of the feedback process (Roos et al., 2012) and can be central to their development. Roos et al. (2012) found that the progress review puts pressure on students, and these could be positive, however, they also shared examples where they were not constructive. Dowde's (2023) small study at one university found similar benefits from undertaking progress reviews, but also highlighted issues such as the behaviour, expertise and

integrity of panel members, as well as lack of confidentiality in terms or reporting issues with supervisory teams. Their study also noted that the language in which reviews were constructed impacted the perception of the student (Dowde, 2023). Another study found a gender difference between student's perceptions of progress reviews with female students spending more time on putting together their progress reports and or worrying about the review compared to men (Mewburn et al., 2014).

In short, different universities do things slightly differently and what they do may change over time, and therefore it can be seen both as a positive experience but also as a subjective, opaque, and incomparable experience by students who are ultimately the intended beneficiaries. We shall highlight some of these differences as well as explore how such reviews/assessments are conducted in four short case studies based in different disciplines at various UK universities with the aim to warn PhD students of potential obstacles ahead. At the same time, we aim to offer supervisors a chance to reflect on their own practice, and some recommendations for good practice.

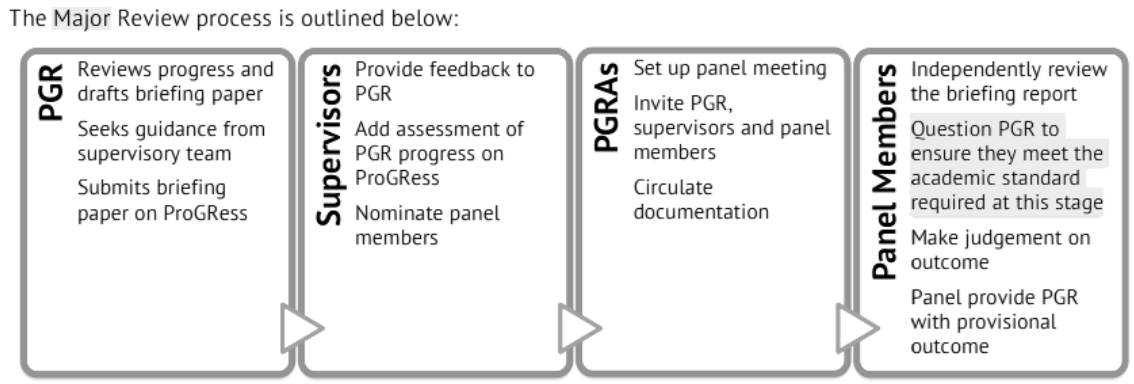
The Organisation and Process of the Process Viva

Typically, this is a light touch checking the progress in the student's thinking, the initial plans and preparations for the research. However, there are differences between UK universities, and perhaps disciplines. We highlight two different approaches on both end of the spectrum. First, at Bournemouth University the progress viva, typically 14-18 months into the PhD, is according to in-house training supposed to be a fairly relaxed but formal conversation between the student with two independent academics, one of whom will act as chair. It is based on a 3,000-word document which is sent to the examiners beforehand. However, in the formal policy documents it states that the student is expected to give a formal 10-minute presentation at the start and the panel members are instructed to 'question PGR [Post-Graduate Student] to ensure they meet the academic standard required at this stage'. The supervisors can attend as silent witnesses. This review is 'an important milestone, normally mid-way through a PGR's enrolment to ensure they are on track to complete their research degree in a timely and successful manner' (BU 2022). It is not necessarily expected at this stage that the student will have any findings to present but should have a plan to ensure all the necessary work needed can be completed in the given timescales. Looking at how the policy guidelines at BU are written, it could be, as Dowde (2023) found, that the formal

nature of the policy affects how students perceive the process as more of a formal examination as opposed to an informal and supportive progress review (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Example One University's Outline of the Transfer Viva



Often, as is the case with many supervisors, due to changes in policies and procedures, and differences between universities, examiners of reviews, even those who have only very recently completed their own doctorate's may be assessing progress following a procedure which is different to the one they themselves experienced. Moreover, despite guidelines (and occasionally training) any situation is based on two people's understanding of that examination is unlikely to be completely objective – which raises questions related to the fairness of the process. After the review the student is normally asked to 'step out' whilst the panel discusses the progress and then come back in for an interim 'decision'. This first example contrasts two major reviews, where one author was part of the examination panel which highlight some of these potential challenges.

Example 1

One the co-author's experience from her PhD was with a supervisory team that had encouraged the student to see the major review as a learning experience, a chance to discuss the subject with interested people. Thus, her transfer viva had been a nerve wracking but positive event. So, when it came to acting as an assessor for a similar review the first time, this co-author met with another very experienced colleague prior to the review panel to share questions, having both read the report and agree a plan of

action. Next, she met with the co-assessor to ensure they were both on the same page to support the student. However, during the meeting the student stated that their report was not a fully accurate overview of their project. This was a curve ball – making much of the preparation irrelevant. The assessors explored the student's current situation and supported them to get a clearer picture for their research. The aim of the progress review is to support and guide, not criticise (Leijen et al., 2016) and although in the post-assessment discussion, the examiners felt that the student lacked some clarity, as this was a supportive process the student should progress, with a subsequent progress report which included some reservations and gave clear guidance for improvement. On reflection this decision left the assessor feeling unsure, believing that a resubmission might have been more supportive to allow the student time to clarify their methodology. However, to further support the student's development our co-author shared comments and questions with the student's supervisor afterwards. This enabled the student to reflect on the feedback in their own time and discuss them with their supervisory team. This, however, also raises a second question related to the student's preparedness for the major review, and the role of their supervisory team. This example reflects the challenges of co-assessment and also reliance on supervisors ensuring their students re well-prepared for the assessment.

Example 2

Here we share how miscommunication between assessors could have impacted the student's experience in relation to feedback. Olmos-López and Sunderland (2017) note the importance of communication between supervisors when providing feedback and for international students the need for compatible, non-conflictual feedback. This could also apply to reviewers. The assessors (one of which is a co-author) met prior to the progress viva to discuss a plan of action, but it became clear a few procedural issues needed to be confirmed and therefore as time was limited. The chair of the progress viva suggested there was no need to discuss potential questions, and that our co-author should ask the first questions. The chair was familiar with the subject matter and quantitative methods, and our co-author with the philosophical approach and qualitative methods. During the progress meeting, the plan was not followed, which changed the tack of the discussion, away from questions around the overarching methodology, a situation that was perhaps confusing for the PhD student. Another challenge she was not prepared for was when the co-assessor asked a question relating to ethics and

culture, the chair (who was familiar with the culture) answered on behalf of the student and the second time the chair attempted this our co-author asked to let the student answer – which they did well. After the review, the chair and our co-assessor agreed the student was ready to progress, however as the summary of his study lacked clarity, they asked for a resubmission to help him develop the clarity of his voice in his writing. This interesting example reflects the need for the focus in assessment to meet the needs of the student.

Example 3

In a different case study from a different co-author in a science department, the progress exam, called the nine-month report, which in this case was 22,000 words. This was typical for that specific department, not the whole university. The report included the literature review, methodology as well as the outline of results obtained so far. It is expected to form the foundation of the final PhD thesis. This contrasts with PhD's in the humanities where in chemistry results can often be obtained very early on from performing computational calculations or pilot experiments. Another major difference is, a student's supervisor is allowed to attend and speak, though does not lead the examination.

Our co-author, doing a science-based PhD, received a grade (of 1-5) and feedback on three key elements of the viva: (1) the written report; (2) the oral viva; and (3) the laboratory experiments (see Table 1).

Table 1

Three key elements of progress viva in this co-author's department.

Written report	Introduction (Background, use of appropriate references, scope, relevance.) Experimental (Can experiments be repeated using the information provided? Is the information reported correctly?) Results (e.g., data quality; significance of results in either positive or negative) Discussion (Contextualisation of results, relevance and where they lead the science, are conclusions valid and fully supported by data provided?)

Oral exam	Background (Underlying concepts and theory to the research.) Results and Evaluation (Ability to defend data and provide further evaluation) Discussion & Contextualisation (Provides an overview, relation of data to the scientific area, is future work sensible/well planned, independent thinking?)
Laboratory Performance	Capability (Competency in experiments? Can student work independently?) Diligence & Attention to Detail (Are all necessary experiments conducted to verify the conclusions?) Effort & Commitment (Does the student put in the effort required for PhD? Are they committed to achieving research excellence?)

This example highlights that difference in timing and especially the length of the progress report the PhD student is expected to produce. The required report is considerably longer than at other universities and in other disciplines, i.e. it is more than for times longer than that of example 4 below.

Example 4

This case focuses on an interdisciplinary pathway combining psychology, computer science and complexity science. This case highlights a need for early intervention support as early factors can snowball into later difficulties.

The first milestone was a 5000-word nine-month 'First progression' review. This review included a critical literature review, the research problem, and a progression plan. The principal supervisor was in the room with the assessor, both were from the psychology department. The review unravelled at the point of methodological discussion. Nonetheless, the review was passed, and the outcome report stated a need for more methodological clarity. This outcome unwittingly kicked the can down the road. At this point, there was still no involvement from the second supervisor. Due to the differing methodological approaches, the following months were a mix of stalled progress and friction between the student and supervisor. Ultimately, the student-supervisor relationship broke down, leaving the student without direct supervision. Despite previous studies highlighting that poor supervision and a lack of expertise on

the part of the supervisory team can negatively impact student wellbeing (Casey et al., 2022; Devine & Hunter, 2017; Levecque et al., 2017), the departmental consensus was to proceed to the confirmation review.

At this university, the 18-month review confirms the transfer from MPhil to PhD. Two psychology academics conducted the review. A chemistry professor observed in the absence of a supervisor. It was a hostile encounter; "you got shredded" was the observer's remark. The standard protocol has the panel discuss the result as the student waits, but the student was not initially informed, instead, the request was to return the following day to consult with one panel member. Our co-author wrote: "I don't recall the conversation the next day. All I do remember is that it was graduation day. I could hear clapping as I left the building upon receiving the news that I had failed my review. The irony was not lost on me. I was figuratively lost and unsure of what to do." As the review aims to support the student (Leijen et al., 2016), this example highlights how a lack of support can negatively impact the student. This lost feeling resonates with McGloin (2022) and the 'moorings' of a student's journey. In one sense, a fixity provides the opportunity for grounding and validation. In another, a mooring is a rigidity that can misalign with the student's current location on the PhD path. Perhaps if the emphasis of a review defensively seeks to mitigate failure at the endpoint, there is less room for a meandering path.

After this, the student switched to part-time, reengaged with his unutilised second supervisor from Computer Science and found another specialist to support him. He was assigned a third supervisor from Psychology. The result was a striking contrast. The thesis concept and methodology were in the correct academic place. However, this co-author felt that his research identity was moored to the outcome of the failed examination. Heron et al. (2023) link the external validation of a successful examination to the researcher's internal validation and confidence. In other words, the student's identity as a researcher was de facto unconfirmed. With three supervisors, the student had to resubmit the confirmation review. This time, the review chair was a science professor supported by another academic from an appropriate discipline. As can be imagined, for the student, this new review was difficult: "I was sure that it would take a turn and go badly. Gladly, that moment never came. Sadly, that feeling never went away." However, the student did feel that the conversation had stretched them and had been useful.

This account reflects how students can feel unable to challenge systems set in place by the University. It might seem obvious that a conflict between two disciples could cause friction, but this was left with the student, and not acknowledged by the specialists. Moreover, a study by Casey et al. (2022) found that PGRs had an expectation that supervisors would provide emotional and wellbeing support as well as academic expertise, helping to build their confidence as researchers, and this example shows the negative impact when such pastoral support is not given.

The Organisation and Process of a Transfer Viva

The transfer viva is a formal event, often with at least two independent examiners who make their decision based on a report written by the student and an oral examination or viva. These examiners are independent of the student's supervisors. The final viva supervisor may attend but often may not speak and can't be involved in any decision-making. In many universities this transfer viva is between 12-18 months from the start of the study. However, at the University of Strathclyde (2021) the transfer is called intermediate assessment, which is informally called the 21-month exam. Figure 2 shows the three requirements for the transfer viva at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan 2023), which are typical for a UK university.

Figure 2

Three Key Elements of a Typical Transfer Examination at UK Universities

A: Written Transfer Report from student *(approximately 3000 – 6000 words) containing an Abstract (approximately 400-500 words) and summarising the work so far, the intended further work, and detailing the original contribution to PhD level. At least 1500 words of the report should be devoted to contextualisation and the assessment of wider implications;*

B: Written report from supervisors on progress made ***(around 500 words)****. Supervisors are asked to comment on the approved programme of research, on the student's individual training programme, and the evidence for work at PhD standard.*

C: Transfer Viva by a Panel

university in the UK, this took an informal supervision meeting about progress to date with his one and only supervisor. Moreover, this co-author was only made aware that

this had been a transfer assessment after the event when his supervisor told him he needed to complete an official form to let the university know he had been transferred from a Master's to the PhD.

Lessons Learnt

The authors acknowledge that within these case examples it is unlikely that any of the supervisor or doctoral teams set out to disadvantage their students, and nor where any actions deliberate. Like the PhD viva at the end, the progress is socially constructed, with two examiners, the student and perhaps one supervisor sitting in a small room. The process is not completely objective as personalities, interpretations of rules and regulations, all can play a role. We have previously highlighted in this journal how the viva outcomes may differ at different UK universities (van Teijlingen et al., 2022) and we would argue that there are also interesting differences between universities in the transfer viva process. However, based on our collective experiences, we have completed a list of recommendations for both students and academic staff (Table 2).

Table 2

Key Issues to Consider as Part of the Progress or Transfer Viva or Review

- Supervisors and postgraduate students read up and understand on their university's regulations.
- Clarity about the process for the students, including the benefit of having second and third opinion on your work to date.
- Supervisors and postgraduate students to ensure they are ready/prepared for the Viva.
- Each supervisor in the team should sign off on all review submissions to avoid oversight.
- Any problems between supervisors and students should be addressed prior to any formal review.
- The assessment team has the relevant experience for interdisciplinary topics to ensure the work context is understood at the review stage.
- Good working partnerships between panel members
- Ensuring the questions are fair and balanced.

- Transfers include a short presentation to provide students with an element they can control.
- Clear and timely feedback to the student (and supervisors).
- Importance of post review feedback – written
- Clarity about the process for the PGR – benefits of having second opinion on your work.
- The need for post review emotional and pastoral support, in particular when the students fails a significant element, this should trigger student support and/or counselling. We also feel that such support discussion should involve a third party - ideally the supervisor.
- Training on how to act as assessor for academic staff.

Of course, academia like many work environments comes with its own time pressures, and often what might seem like a small thing to one person, may have quite a different impact on another. The authors agree with Dowde (2023) that progress reviews can be effective in supporting students on their doctoral journeys, with benefits including the benefits of the conversation in surfacing challenges with the project, think more deeply about aspects of their research, give clear actions for next steps, build on feedback, evidence issues with supervisory relationships and other personal problems.

Key to a successful transfer viva where there is any type of panel interview is preparation by each panel member and also a shared understanding of the approach that should be taken to support the student. Panel members should be provided with adequate training in order to both take on the role of chair but also that of examiner. It might be useful for doctoral colleges to provide a list of expectations for supervisor beyond a one liner, that ensure they cover key aspects of the student's progress and gives specific feedback aligned to these.

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