NOTES ON HOW TO DEAL WITH A PhD VIVA-VOCE EXAM

Examiners (internal as well as external) must be satisfied that:

1. The thesis is professionally produced (only a few typos, good English, legible graphs, appropriate and up-to-date references, etc.). If a student discovers any mistakes in the thesis (not just in style) after it has been submitted it is a good idea to make a list of these in case the examiners comment on them in the viva.
2. The work is the student's own, except of course where appropriate acknowledgements are made to the work of others.
3. The thesis represents a good amount of work for the period studied (e.g., 36 months).
4. The thesis reports ORIGINAL (i.e., publishable) and CHALLENGING work in an appropriate academic discipline. These are the most important aspects of the thesis. If papers have been published, are in preparation or submitted then all the better. If not, then the student should have a good idea of papers to come out of their work, and where (i.e., the journal).

To meet these requirements the student must be able to:

5. Clearly state the original motivation, aims and objectives of the work.
6. Summarise their main (original) achievements and conclusions, and actual or expected impacts.
7. Set work in context. This means knowing about, and being able to explain, other related work and how this connects with the thesis (see also 10. below).
8. Detail the main activities of the project.
10. Answer questions in wider areas, usually (but not necessarily) on work related to the thesis.
11. Answer basic as well as more detailed questions. A common fault in vivas is a student being able to answer questions on complicated subjects linked to their work while messing up answers to questions on simple stuff. Never forget basics.
12. Discuss possible lines of future work.

Apart from the requirements above it is impossible to be more specific about what questions might arise in a viva (nor how long a viva will last; expect at least two hours, with three hours being a rough average). It might be useful to know something about the research interests of the examiners, though most examiners will (or should) concentrate on the student's work not their own.

Remember the following points regarding how a student should answer questions:

13. Listen carefully to questions.
14. Think carefully before an answer is given. A few moments' reflection always helps to focus the mind. Don't panic!
15. It's often appropriate to give short(ish) answer first and then ask the examiners if they would like more details. Avoid waffling or over complicated answers or responses.
16. If you are unsure of an answer, or simply don't know, then say so. However it's often a good idea to speculate (i.e., offer an educated or reasoned guess). Related to this, if you start to give an answer that turns out to be wrong, or an error is spotted in the thesis, then admit the mistake rather than cover it up. No one's perfect.
17. Don't be too clever and answer questions that examiners haven't asked.
18. Don't be afraid to stand your ground over a point if you can justify your case. It is quite reasonable to argue (in a friendly way) in a viva. However there may be circumstances when it might be better to save any argument until after the viva; after all you don't want to upset an examiner!

A student should note that they will (or should) know their work better than ANYONE else. This is the main advantage they have over examiners (and their supervisors for that matter). However, this presumes that the student has thoroughly prepared for the viva by re-reading their thesis (and relevant, key papers, books, etc.) beforehand, rather like revising for a written exam. Some supervisors help prepare students by running a 'dummy' viva (many supervisors will also have been PhD examiners). Some of my own students have found this to be useful though pretty tough going at the time.

Finally, at the end of a viva the student will usually be asked to leave the room for the examiners to consider their decision and recommendations. A very common outcome (but not the only one) is to recommend the award of a PhD subject to minor changes to the thesis (e.g., to correct typos) to be made within a suitable deadline, and then checked by the internal examiner (so that the external won't have any further input).

GOOD LUCK !!!!

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