



3. PhD Viva Voce: The Final Academic Evaluation or a Ceremonial Formality? A Critical Review of Doctoral Assessment Practices in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) represents the highest academic qualification, intended to recognize original research, independent scholarship, and meaningful contributions to knowledge. Among the various stages of doctoral evaluation, the viva voce (oral examination) serves as the final and arguably the most critical assessment of a candidate's intellectual competence and research authenticity. However, concerns have increasingly emerged regarding whether the viva voce in Indian universities continues to function as a rigorous academic examination or has gradually evolved into a ceremonial exercise with predetermined outcomes. This paper critically examines the present system of doctoral viva voce, identifies structural and procedural shortcomings, and proposes reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, academic rigor, and public confidence in doctoral evaluation.

Keywords: *PhD, Viva Voce, Doctoral Education, Higher Education, Research Quality, Academic Assessment, Transparency, India*

Introduction

A Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree is universally regarded as the highest level of academic achievement. Unlike conventional postgraduate qualifications, its primary objective is not merely the acquisition of advanced knowledge but the creation of new knowledge through systematic inquiry, critical analysis, and original research. A doctoral dissertation is expected to demonstrate the candidate's ability to conduct independent research, contribute to scholarly discourse, and address unresolved questions within a discipline.

The academic value of a PhD, however, depends less on the possession of the degree than on the credibility of the evaluation process through which it is awarded. Over recent decades, concerns have grown regarding declining research quality, the rapid expansion of doctoral enrolments, increasing dependence on technological tools, and inconsistencies in doctoral assessment practices. These developments raise an important question: **Is the current doctoral evaluation system sufficiently rigorous to uphold the integrity of the PhD degree?**

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The Changing Perception of the PhD Degree

Historically, earning a PhD signified exceptional academic competence and substantially enhanced opportunities in teaching, research, and professional careers. In recent years, however, the exponential growth in doctoral degrees, coupled with concerns over research quality and limited academic employment opportunities, has altered public and institutional perceptions.

This changing landscape has shifted attention from the degree itself to the credibility of the processes through which doctoral qualifications are awarded.

Challenges in Establishing Research Originality

The doctoral dissertation forms the foundation of PhD assessment. Universities generally rely on plagiarism-detection software and originality declarations signed by researchers and supervisors to verify authenticity.

However, advances in artificial intelligence have introduced new complexities. AI-powered paraphrasing and content-generation tools can substantially alter borrowed material while retaining its underlying ideas, making conventional plagiarism detection increasingly inadequate. Consequently, originality certificates often remain ethical declarations rather than independently verifiable guarantees of genuine intellectual contribution.

This development necessitates stronger evaluation mechanisms capable of assessing not merely textual originality but also conceptual ownership and scholarly understanding.

The Intended Role of Viva Voce

Following successful dissertation evaluation by external examiners, candidates appear for the viva voce—the final oral examination before the award of the doctoral degree.

Ideally, the viva should assess multiple dimensions of scholarly competence, including:

- Subject expertise
- Understanding of research methodology
- Conceptual clarity
- Originality of ideas
- Interpretation of findings
- Logical reasoning
- Analytical ability
- Practical understanding of research execution

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A rigorous viva should enable examiners to evaluate whether the candidate genuinely conducted the research and possesses comprehensive command over every aspect of the dissertation.

Typical areas requiring critical examination include:

- Selection and formulation of the research problem
- Literature review and theoretical framework
- Research design and methodology
- Standardization of laboratory or field procedures
- Data collection and analysis
- Interpretation of findings
- Novel contributions to existing knowledge
- Limitations of the study
- Practical challenges encountered during research
- Future research directions

Thus, the viva is intended to evaluate not merely the dissertation but the researcher behind it.

Is the Viva Voce Serving Its Intended Purpose?

One of the most striking observations in Indian higher education is the near-universal success rate in doctoral viva examinations. Cases in which candidates fail the viva, are asked to reappear, or are denied the degree solely on the basis of unsatisfactory oral performance appear to be exceptionally rare.

This phenomenon invites two possible interpretations:

1. Nearly every doctoral candidate demonstrates an exceptionally high level of academic competence; or
2. The viva has gradually evolved into a procedural formality intended primarily to ratify an already anticipated outcome.

Given the diversity of institutions, disciplines, and research quality across the country, the second explanation warrants serious academic scrutiny.

If the viva almost invariably concludes with successful degree recommendation, its effectiveness as an independent quality-control mechanism deserves careful examination.

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Evolution of the Viva Format

Another notable development is the increasing reliance on pre-prepared PowerPoint presentations during viva examinations.

In many universities, candidates devote substantial time to presenting prepared slides summarizing their research. Since external examiners have generally reviewed the dissertation beforehand, the presentation often duplicates information already available to them.

Consequently, spontaneous questioning—the core element of any oral examination—occupies only a relatively small portion of the allotted time.

This shift risks transforming the viva from an interactive intellectual assessment into a structured presentation exercise, thereby weakening its original academic purpose.

Administrative Practices and Their Academic Implications

An often-overlooked aspect of doctoral evaluation concerns interactions between researchers, supervisors, and external examiners before the viva.

In numerous institutions, considerable attention is devoted to arranging accommodation, transportation, hospitality, and logistical support for external examiners. While hospitality is a customary institutional responsibility, excessive personal involvement by researchers or supervisors may unintentionally compromise perceptions of impartiality.

The credibility of doctoral assessment depends not only upon fairness but also upon the appearance of fairness. Administrative arrangements should therefore remain institutionally managed and professionally separated from the academic evaluation process.

Reforming the Doctoral Viva: Policy Recommendations

Strengthening the credibility of doctoral evaluation requires structural reforms rather than cosmetic changes. The following measures merit serious consideration.

1. Confidentiality of External Examiners

The identity of external examiners should remain confidential until the final stage of evaluation. All communication should be handled exclusively by the university to minimize undue influence.

2. Institutional Management of Logistics

Accommodation, travel, hospitality, and administrative arrangements should be coordinated solely by the university administration, ensuring that neither the candidate nor the supervisor directly manages these responsibilities.

3. Standardized Academic Evaluation

Universities should prescribe minimum academic standards for viva examinations.

For example:

- A predetermined minimum number of substantive research questions may be required.
- Questions should comprehensively cover the dissertation.
- Candidates should demonstrate satisfactory responses to a prescribed proportion of questions.
- Candidates unable to meet the required standard should be permitted to reappear after appropriate preparation.

Such standards would promote greater consistency across institutions.

4. Mandatory Digital Documentation

Every viva examination should be audio-visually recorded in its entirety.

The recording should include:

- Questions asked
- Responses provided
- Examiner observations
- Final recommendations

These records should be securely archived.

5. Independent Academic Review

Recorded viva proceedings should undergo independent institutional review before the final award of the degree. Such oversight would substantially improve transparency, accountability, and public confidence.

Discussion

The purpose of these recommendations is not to undermine the doctoral viva but to restore its original academic significance.

The viva should remain an intellectually demanding examination capable of verifying:

- Independent scholarship
- Research ownership
- Subject mastery
- Critical thinking

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- Original contribution

A rigorous oral examination serves as an important safeguard against academic misconduct and ensures that the doctoral degree retains its scholarly prestige.

Without meaningful evaluation, the credibility of both the dissertation and the degree itself may gradually erode.

Conclusion

The prestige of a PhD depends not upon the length of the dissertation or the number of degrees awarded but upon the integrity of the evaluation process.

If the viva voce is genuinely intended to serve as the final examination of doctoral research, it must embody the principles expected of any serious academic assessment: rigor, transparency, impartiality, accountability, and intellectual challenge.

Transforming the viva from a ceremonial endorsement into a meaningful evaluation would not only strengthen individual doctoral qualifications but also reinforce public trust in India's higher education system.

Ultimately, this is not merely an institutional concern but a national academic priority. Universities, research institutions, regulatory authorities, and policymakers must collectively re-examine existing doctoral assessment practices to ensure that the PhD continues to represent genuine scholarly excellence rather than procedural completion.

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Note: This paper presents a critical policy perspective intended to stimulate academic discussion and institutional reform. The arguments are analytical and normative in nature rather than based on empirical survey data.