

Twelve predictable questions

Trafford and Leshem (2002) suggest that a good way for doctoral students to prepare a proposal and undertake research is by beginning with the criteria that will be applied to its examination. They analysed the questions asked in 25 doctoral vivas and concluded that all questions could be grouped in 12 clusters – they chose a question from each cluster which typified the focus of the cluster. They moved on to suggest that an early and continued focus on these 12 questions would enable candidates to be clear throughout the period of research on how their work demonstrates ‘doctoral worthiness’ and enable them to anticipate and answer questions when they come to being examined. They suggest that this list of questions, together with a clear understanding of the concepts that underlie them, can be used to guide a project from the research proposal stage, through detailed research design and methodology to the structuring and final writing of the thesis, and the final examination stages. The questions also provide “a template for you to check that answers are incorporated within the text of your thesis, and that there is cohesion within that text” (pp46-47).

Supervisors could also use these questions to prepare their students, both for the viva itself and for intermediate experiences. For example, it would be helpful if students are presenting their work at a conference or research seminar, to use these questions to prepare for those that the audience is likely to ask. It might be expected that questions asked by an interested and knowledgeable conference audience would be similar to those the examiners will ask in the viva. The questions could beneficially be used to structure a ‘mock’ viva.

The twelve indicative questions are:

1. Why did you choose this topic for your doctoral study?
2. How did you arrive at your conceptual framework?
3. How did you arrive at your research design?
4. How would you justify your choice of methodology?
5. Why did you decide to use XYZ as your main instrument?
6. How did you select your respondents/materials?
7. How did you arrive at your conceptual conclusions?
8. How generalisable are your findings – and why?
9. What is your contribution to knowledge?
10. What criticisms would you make of your thesis?
11. What are you going to do after you gain your doctorate?
12. Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about your thesis which you have not had the opportunity to tell us during the viva? (pp41-46)

The article offers a range of other ways in which questions in each cluster might be framed, so just being able to answer the question as it is expressed in this list is not enough. These questions stand for a deeper understanding of underlying concepts and choices and they offer an opportunity for candidates to make their ‘doctorateness’ or ‘doctoral worthiness’ apparent. As an example, for question 10 examiners do not necessarily wish the candidate to come up with overt criticisms and actual failings but they want evidence of reflection and awareness of alternative choices that might have been made, evidence of a maturity of approach, understanding of other ways the project might have been tackled, a demonstration of the capacity to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the research, a display of the ability to consider and evaluate what the candidate might choose to do differently in the future.

Trafford, V. & Leshem, S. 2002. Starting at the end to undertake doctoral research: predictable questions as stepping stones. *Higher Education Review*, 35(1), 31-49.