



## ‘SMILE AND NOD’ OR MORE? REASSESSING THE ROLE OF THE SILENT SUPERVISOR IN THE DOCTORAL VIVA

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### ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The study examines the perspectives of convenors, examiners, supervisors, and candidates to gather their views on the presence of the supervisor in oral examinations (doctoral viva) and to reassess the role of the mainly silent supervisor in the doctoral viva.
Background	Supervisors are central to candidates’ doctoral journey, and their roles have been well documented. However, supervisors’ role in the doctoral viva remains elusive, insignificant, and misunderstood.
Methodology	The study adopts a qualitative survey method and qualitative interviews to examine the perspectives of 94 participants, including convenors, examiners, supervisors, and candidates. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and an open-ended survey and was later analyzed using a qualitative approach.
Contribution	The findings have implications for the doctoral viva and policies that seek to make it a collegial and equitable practice.
Findings	The findings offer two main explanations that warrant supervisors’ physical presence in oral examinations: psycho-emotional support and procedural/regulatory purposes. Supervisors’ voices serve psycho-emotional and technical purposes and aid in dialogue and knowledge construction.

Accepting Editor Charles Randy Nichols | Received: January 20, 2022 | Revised: May 28, July 5, 2022 |  
Accepted: July 8, 2022.

Cite as: Kumar, V., Kaur, A., Sharmini, S., & Noman, M. (2022). ‘Smile and nod’ or more? Reassessing the role of the silent supervisor in the doctoral viva. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 17, 263-277.  
<https://doi.org/10.28945/5002>

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Recommendations for Practitioners	It is recommended that practitioners need to move on from the customary ‘smile and nod’ role of supervisors to allowing their voices to be heard, perhaps at the end of the viva. This would not only facilitate candidates’ performance by offering affirmation and assurance through psychological and moral support but also provide an opportunity for discussion.
Recommendations for Researchers	This study furthers our understanding of the ‘anatomy of a doctoral viva’ and examines a comprehensive picture of the supervisor’s role in a doctoral oral exam from all stakeholders’ perspectives.
Impact on Society	The role of supervisors in the doctoral viva, beginning from the medieval period, has consistently evolved. The research provides a fresh outlook on supervision where the supervisor is not only recommended to be present during the viva, but also to play an active role.
Future Research	Future research should include diverse cultural, institutional, and disciplinary contexts to advance our understanding of the supervisor’s role during oral exams. Also, whether supervisors should have a more active role independent of what a convenor may desire should be investigated.
Keywords	doctoral viva, higher education, assessment, supervisors’ voice, PhD

## INTRODUCTION

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In an oral exam chaired by an author of this paper, an examiner made the following comment to a candidate: ‘You have only interviewed five participants. Do you think this is sufficient for a PhD?’. The candidate, a mature student, looked flustered. Watching the supervisors who were sitting across the table, the candidate replied, ‘I wanted to collect more data, but some people (pointing to the supervisors) told me not to interview more than five participants.’ If we were the supervisor in that oral exam, we would have wanted to justify this point, but regulations stipulate that the supervisor must be a silent observer.

In several institutional traditions, the supervisor’s presence in the viva is optional. Nevertheless, if they are present, they are to remain silent (Grabble, 2003; Hobson, 2019; Watts, 2012). Smith (2016, p. 43) postulates that supervisors will accompany the candidate to the oral and that their roles are to ‘provide moral support, to observe the proceedings and to take notes’.

The current literature on doctoral studies rarely discusses the issue of ‘silent’ or ‘absent’ supervisors in the doctoral oral examination. The role of the supervisor in the doctoral viva, beginning from the medieval period, has consistently evolved with the meaning of knowledge construction. We elaborate on this evolution in the next section; however, what remains consistent is the fact that supervisors are central to candidates’ doctoral journey from beginning to end. In current times, supervisors’ roles during doctoral studies, before the doctoral viva, and after the viva are well-documented (Hobson, 2019; Taylor & Beasley, 2005). For example, supervisors are primarily required to train doctoral students to become independent researchers (Kaur et al., 2021), and establish meaningful professional relationships with candidates for the successful accomplishment of doctoral degrees (Holbrook et al., 2014) by assuming the role of a coach (Nichol et al., 2018). Supervisors’ roles also include providing timely, constructive, and consistent feedback on doctoral students’ theses (Aitchison & Mowbray, 2013), facilitating their efforts in writing and generating publications (Cuthbert & Spark, 2008), sustaining their motivation (Kumar & Kaur, 2019) and finally providing pre-viva and post-viva facilitation (Watts, 2012). However, their role during the doctoral viva remains elusive and insignificant. A comprehensive web-based search informs us that the supervisor’s role during the doctoral viva has never been examined from the stakeholders’ perspective in the doctoral supervision and assessment

literature. The search only offers guidelines for supervisors' technical roles, such as arranging an examiner and communicating decisions with candidates, mainly through the guidelines on the doctoral viva. These roles are discussed in the next section.

The outcome of the exam is based on the evaluation of collaboratively created knowledge, which the candidate produces by consistently using developmental and formative feedback from supervisors over a period of years. A doctoral qualification is a collaborative pursuit between the candidate and their supervisors (Watts, 2012), but the current practices of doctoral oral examination are obscure and may even be misaligned with this fact. The literature discussed in a later section explores diverse practices and policies that define supervisors' roles across several countries and reveals that it is indeed diverse and sometimes ambiguous. Thus, we argue that it is imperative to reassess the role of supervisors, which remains obscure during the viva despite supervisors being important stakeholders, and to determine if their presence during the oral examination is meaningful.

The objective of the study is to assess the role of supervisors in the doctoral viva from the perspective of stakeholders involved in the viva: candidates, examiners, convenors, and the supervisors themselves. However, to understand the role of the silent supervisor in the oral examination, it is essential to understand how these roles are specified.

## **SUPERVISORS IN DOCTORAL ORAL EXAMINATIONS: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

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A cross-national (UK, South Africa, Hong Kong, US, Australia, and NZ) comparison of PhD supervision models, milestones, and examination procedures found that each country differed in terms of examination procedures and the role of the supervisor in the oral examination (Dobson, 2018; Dominguez-Whitehead & Maringe, 2020).

In terms of the oral examination, there are typically three types: compulsory, hybrid, and ritualised examination (Kumar et al., 2022). The compulsory oral is a closed-door event with only the supervisors and examiners present; this leaves no opportunity for any form of scrutiny and has thus been described as a black box and also a mystery (Carter, 2008). In the hybrid type, which is held in public, examiners and supervisors attend, and the viva is seen as a rite of passage as the candidate's work has already been passed prior to the viva. The ritualised type of viva is not considered an examination but more of a celebratory event and a ceremonial public debate.

In the UK system, and those based on it, supervisors are normally debarred from acting as examiners and, in many cases, are excluded from even attending. Although not active participants in the process, supervisors, with the agreement of the candidate, can be present as silent witnesses; they are most often seated behind the candidate and encouraged to take notes (Taylor & Beasley, 2005). However, each academic institution has its own set of guidelines about the viva examination process, and protocols regarding the attendance of one or more supervisors can vary (Denicolo et al., 2020). The supervisors' role is reactivated once the final decision is announced. When the outcome of the oral examination is that the thesis be revised, supervisors may need to advise them on how to proceed so that they can revise accordingly. Similarly, when no recommendation to award is made, supervisors must offer candidates support and, where appropriate, advise them on an appeal. However, in the vast majority of cases, the recommendation of the examiners is positive, and all that the supervisor has to do is to join the student at the customary dinner or drinks to celebrate their achievement (Watts, 2012).

PhD thesis examination practices in South Africa closely resemble those of the UK (Bitzer et al., 2018). Supervisors do not examine, but at most universities, a supervisor may function as a non-examining member of the examination panel who, though not having a vote, may supply additional information on the relevant study if requested by the examination committee. When there are no oral examinations, the decision of the examination committee or body is usually final unless a supervisor

launches a formal appeal, which is then considered by the appropriate committee/body. Supervisors assist students with the amendments requested by the examination panel, especially in cases where major or substantial revisions are required.

A role that supervisors play in the PhD oral examination in Belgium and the Netherlands is that of giving a *laudatio* after the defence. It should be noted that the oral examination in both these traditions is a public event; a formal ceremony in which examiners wear the official university gown. The supervisor presents the laudation to honour the candidate and their achievements (Mežek & Swales, 2016).

In Hong Kong, PhD vivas are preceded by examiners’ reports. In some universities, the chair may invite the supervisor to participate in the discussion and ask questions. However, the supervisor does not have a veto vote regarding the final outcome. In Spain, supervisors may attend the oral defence as a member of the audience but are not allowed to participate in the discussion (Hobson, 2019).

In the US and countries with systems based on it, the chief advisor and the advisory committee constitute a majority of the examiners, usually with the addition of one or more faculty from the institution to provide an independent perspective (Chen, 2008; Foote, 2016; Kehm, 2001). Additionally, in the US system, ‘the major advisor is simply a committee member though in some institutions they don’t vote, in others they don’t even question’ (Foote, 2016, p. 82). Internal or external examiners are not appointed; instead, committee members (supervisors) both guide the student’s research and are responsible for assessing the student’s written proposal, oral defence of the proposal, written dissertation, and oral defence of the dissertation to determine if their work is PhD worthy. While the oral examination may have previously been viewed as a distressing ritual by PhD students, it is now more of a conversation, in which the student is encouraged to display their knowledge and reflect on the research conducted (Dominguez-Whitehead & Maringe, 2020).

In Australia, an oral examination is rare (Lovat et al., 2015). However, since the launch of the viva at the University of Western Australia in 2018, there has been an increase in the number of oral examinations. The guidelines stipulate that supervisors are not permitted to join the candidate during the examination but should provide support prior to the oral and this includes ensuring the candidate understands the process and is provided with an opportunity for feedback through a mock viva. The supervisor also needs to undertake administrative roles prior to the oral, including meeting and greeting examiners, escorting examiners to the examination venue, and meeting examiners for a social event after the oral examination (Dally et al., 2019).

The role of supervisors in the oral across the eight NZ universities also varies. A web search of doctoral examination procedures indicated that in six universities, supervisors are invited to the oral with the agreement of the student; in the other two universities, there is an expectation that supervisors attend the oral. In one NZ university, the supervisor is allowed to be present during the deliberation stage of the examination but does not have a veto (Kumar et al., 2022). In some cases, supervisors are only invited to discuss points of clarification after the candidate has been examined (Carter, 2008). In one university, a senior supervisor can participate in an oral but only to the extent permitted by the chair (Kumar et al., 2022). Participation is limited to clarification of points; the supervisor is not to act as an advocate for the candidate or to answer questions on behalf of the candidate. The senior supervisor may represent any absent examiner by asking their questions and also be present to clarify but not take part in the decision-making process. Other supervisors attend as observers. If revisions are required, the senior supervisor is responsible for checking the final amendments. In another NZ institution, at the end of the oral, the supervisors make a statement to the examiners and answer any questions that examiners post (Kumar et al., 2022). It is important to note that, in all NZ universities, supervisors act in a supportive role but not in a participatory role during the oral examination. They also play an important role post-exam to ensure the completion of the process (Kumar et al., 2022).

In the oral examination of their candidates, the role of supervisors may be clearly defined in some countries and various educational systems. However, a succinct review of current practices and traditions in the doctoral viva across several countries indicates an inconsistent and sometimes ambiguous trend regarding supervisors' presence and participation. Although there is a history of being present and providing a varied but limited range of support, the supervisor is a silent and sometimes misunderstood participant in current practice.

Thus, the current study adopts a qualitative approach to examine the perspectives of 94 participants including supervisors, examiners, candidates, and convenors to reassess the role of the supervisor in the doctoral viva.

## METHODOLOGY

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The study uses a qualitative research design and two data collection methods: qualitative survey data and face-to-face semi-structured interviews.

### *METHOD 1*

#### **Procedure**

Qualitative survey data for this study were collected from a research-intensive university in NZ where the oral exam is mandatory. The main sources of data were convenors of oral exams, who participated in an open-ended qualitative survey. The rationale for a survey was to enable large amounts of data to be collected from all registered convenors. At this university, the oral is chaired by a convenor, who is a facilitator and need not be an expert in the subject matter of examination. Convenors are usually not drawn from the candidate's supervising department. Perspectives from convenors were collected using an open-ended Qualtrics survey.

#### **Participants**

All convenors ( $n = 238$ ) listed in the university's registry (the study site) of convenors were invited to participate. Sixty-two convenors (C#) responded to the survey, almost half of whom ( $n = 30$ ) had convened more than ten oral exams; the remaining had convened at least five. The majority of the respondents were from the sciences, with an estimated 10% from the humanities and social sciences.

### *METHOD 2*

#### **Procedure**

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data. The interviews lasted for 20-25 minutes. Responses were based on participatory roles during the viva; for example, participants who were recruited as examiners responded and reflected on their positionality as examiners during the viva, while convenors spoke only about their positionality as convenors.

Other than demographic information, the questions for both the survey and face-to-face interviews comprised two binary yes/no questions: (1) 'Should supervisors attend a candidate's oral examination?'; and (2) 'Should supervisors be able to speak in the oral examination?' Survey questions functioned as probing questions; for example, 'In what ways do you think the presence of a supervisor can be meaningful in a PhD viva, for students as well the supervisor?'

#### **Participants**

Ten faculty participants who had recently served as examiners (E#), ten supervisors (Sv#), and 12 PhD candidates (St#) who had recently (no longer than three months prior) defended their thesis in the oral examination were invited for qualitative interviews.

The rationale behind inviting convenors' voice as the primary source of data is their position, which is neutral and unbiased towards the role of the other stakeholders involved in the process (Kaur et al., 2021). The convenor plays a pivotal role in determining the role of the supervisor in the oral. For example, the supervisor cannot participate without an invitation from the convenor. In some circumstances, the convenor can ask the supervisor for clarification. Further, it is the convenor who decides how the supervisor's report is interpreted and utilised in the oral. In other words, how active the supervisor can be in an oral is the prerogative and at the discretion of the convenor. It should be noted that at the university where the study was conducted, the supervisor's report is mandatory and sent to the Doctoral Office when the thesis has been submitted for examination. Among other things, the report confirms that the candidate's work has been done under their immediate supervision and that the supervisors agree that the thesis is suitable for submission. Supervisors also provide any other relevant information on the candidate's work, which, in recent times, includes a Covid-19 impact statement. The convenor may wish to make this report available to the examiners after all three examiners' reports have been submitted.

## DATA ANALYSIS

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The survey data from all sources were transcribed and collated. Data were first open-coded independently by the researchers, who focused on emerging themes in relation to the physical presence and voice of supervisors in the oral. The researchers then engaged in axial coding, looking for connections between the codes and collapsing overlapping codes (Thomas, 2006). After this, the researchers met to discuss and review all codes, and areas of disagreement were discussed and resolved. We grouped the codes into themes and subthemes. Since the qualitative data was collected in large quantity, the researchers chose to incorporate numerical analysis as it contributes to 'internal generalisability', appropriately characterises the diversity of opinions, and facilitates the adequate representation of data interpretations (Maxwell, 2010).

## FINDINGS

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### *BINARY QUESTION ANALYSIS*

#### **Should supervisors attend the candidate's oral examination?**

Of all responses to this question (n = 94), approximately 73.40% (69) were affirmative, indicating a high preference for supervisors' presence in oral examinations. This included 67.74% (42) of convenors, 90% (9) of supervisors, 83.33% (10) of students, and 80% (8) of examiners.

#### **Should supervisors be able to speak in the candidate's oral examination?**

For this question, of all respondents (n = 94), approximately 64.89% (61) were affirmative, indicating a high preference for supervisors' voice in oral examinations. This included 61.20% (38) of convenors, 70% (7) of supervisors, 83.33% (10) of students, and 60% (6) of examiners, clearly indicating reservations for this option as compared with physical presence.

Convenors, especially senior convenors, and a few examiners, students, and supervisors shared their concerns regarding the inclusion of supervisors in oral examinations. The survey data elaborate on this statistic in the final theme.

### *PHYSICAL PRESENCE FOR PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL REASONS*

Stakeholders who supported the presence of the supervisor were of the view that the presence of supervisors is to aid the emotional and psychological well-being of the candidate. Convenors supported the presence of the supervisor as they felt that this would provide 'moral support' – a term

mentioned by at least 54 convenors. Other terms that consistently appeared throughout the data justifying supervisors' presence included 'human/emotional support', 'reassurance', and 'encouragement' for students. Other perspectives mentioned by senior convenors were that the presence of the supervisor 'can help calm the candidate' (C#54) and offered 'a collegial PhD experience' (C#5). In essence, convenors were of the view that it is essential for supervisors to be present in the oral – for one convenor, 'it would be hugely disappointing for a supervisor not to be able to attend to their student's oral' (C#57).

From the examiners' point of view, the presence of a supervisor during the viva 'helps students feel relaxed knowing that their supervisor is there to "shield" them' (E#4). One examiner noted that 'when the supervisor nods, students feel encouraged as it signifies approval' (E#2). The majority of the examiners supported the presence of the supervisor for emotional reasons but cautioned that at times 'it is difficult to raise tricky questions knowing this was done under supervision' (E#9).

Supervisors are of the opinion that their presence is emotionally supportive for the candidate. For example, one said, 'It is also a proud moment to see my student performing independently in the oral' (Sv#3). Another reiterated that 'the sense of shared achievement and joy that I experience conveys confidence to my students' (Sv#6).

Others are of the view that they can offer moral support by just being there. Additionally, for some supervisors, the oral is like 'a process of completion and celebration of years-long collaboration' (Sv#2). Supervisors also revealed that attendance at the oral provides a developmental experience for them, which could result in better supervision practices to prepare students for the oral by providing better support to deal with psycho-emotional issues.

The data also suggest that the majority of students (8 of 12) wanted their supervisors to be present for psychological support. They used words such as 'moral support', 'encouragement', and 'protection' to validate the supervisor's presence. The presence of the supervisor is essential as 'it provides support to the candidate to an otherwise alien environment, one which unfortunately is shrouded in mystery' (St#11). One added that 'I want my supervisor to be proud when the final verdict is announced that I have made it' (St#4). A different perspective was provided by one student, who was of the opinion that the oral provides an opportunity to prove that the supervisor was wrong and to 'know that my decision to go against him was right!' (St#9); this student clearly felt euphoric at finally being able to stand up for themselves. Students who supported the presence of the supervisor in the oral noted that if supervisors attend, they have a very specific role – to 'smile and nod' (St#3) and to 'acknowledge the value of the student's work' (St#2); basically, to create an uplifting environment.

### ***PHYSICAL PRESENCE FOR PROCEDURAL AND REGULATORY PURPOSES***

A second reason enumerated to justify supervisors' presence was for technical and practical purposes. Convenors were of the opinion that supervisors would be able to provide technical assistance to students if they got stuck. One gave an example of where a student wanted to quote from a page of the thesis but was struggling; the supervisor, with the permission of the convenor, assisted by indicating the page number (C#31). In another instance, a supervisor assisted by monitoring the time (C#7). One convenor noted that 'with the presence of the supervisor, I know I have to convene by the books and ensure it is a fair and transparent process' (C#13).

Examiners expressed positive views on supervisors' presence during the viva. One mentioned that 'a supervisor can take notes of the discussion; they are more familiar with the topic of study can make better interpretations of examiners' recommendations' (E#5). Others commented that supervisors can ensure the 'candidates are given the opportunities to respond to examiners' (E#10) and that the supervisor's presence is essential to ensure that the candidate 'takes my comments into consideration and revises accordingly if appropriate' (E#2). For one, supervisors are better placed to understand that 'examiner comments are in fact invitations for the candidate to think differently and procedure-wise, supervisors and candidates can make the decision' (E#1), and 'supervisors can confirm that

procedures are followed and the candidate is not victimised – this is particularly important for unfavourable outcomes' (E#4).

According to supervisors, their presence is required for procedural purposes; that is, to ensure the process is unbiased as well as to ensure the 'intellectual validation of the value of the process' (Sv#7). During the process, supervisors can also clarify any issues with the consent of the convenor. A supervisor may be able to provide input into examiners' decisions when things are not clear in terms of the quality of the work. This is usually after the oral; supervisors can request to make comments before examiners deliberate. This process can serve to 'confirm anything or explain something tricky' (Sv#3). Supervisors also felt that by attending the oral, 'they will be able to provide feedback on the student's performance even though this might be the last time the student might be performing under an examination condition' (Sv#6). Additionally, a significant number of supervisors (7) reported that their attendance at the viva was also for learning about future roles as an examiner or a convenor; for example, 'this was an opportunity to gain insights into the oral ... I have learnt how to be an examiner' (Sv#8). For another, their presence meant 'now I know how to equip my students with the right vocabulary to defend in a collegial manner!' (Sv#11).

The students provided procedural reasons for a supervisor's presence; for instance, 'to act as another listening ear' (St#5), so that they are fully informed on what needs to be done and gain an 'independent understanding of the corrections and revisions of the thesis that is required' (St#6). Supervisors' presence can help students to see that the views of the examiners are useful in post-oral revisions; in other words, students are of the view that the supervisor can 'bear witness to understand the issues of the examiners' (St#1). Supervisors act as 'ears' for the candidate to support amendments, as the candidate may not be listening, focusing, or appreciating the exact details of what is required, and only so much can be captured in the examiner's report.

The discussion above provides perspectives of stakeholders as to why supervisors should be present or not in the oral exam. It should be recalled that the literature across traditions stipulates those supervisors are allowed to speak in an oral only when requested by the convenor, but under what circumstances this is done is not clear. In the next section, we provide stakeholder perceptions of supervisors' voice in the oral examination.

### ***VOICES FOR PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT***

Some 61.20% (38) of the convenors in the study were of the opinion that supervisors should be allowed to contribute during the oral examination; however, contributing does not mean assisting the student to answer questions. Some convenors were explicit in their expressions; for instance:

There are limited roles the supervisors can play in an oral exam. Supervisors can be invited to speak either during the oral or after the oral. In the first instance, supervisors are allowed to speak only by invitation. Some who are invited to speak are allowed to participate to stimulate discussion without detracting from the candidate's ability to convey knowledge. In other circumstances, supervisors are invited to provide background information on the supervision – but this is usually done without the presence of the students. (C#34)

According to convenors, supervisors should be invited to speak when the candidate gets nervous or is 'clearly floundering and asks the supervisors directly for support' (C#16). At times, 'the supervisor can be invited to speak if the candidate, who has been given plenty of opportunity, still cannot answer and the examiners really want to know about some aspect of the research' (C#9). Accordingly, supervisors may ask to speak to help their candidate understand a question, particularly if the convenor feels that the candidate does not comprehend what was asked; 'this could also include misunderstanding between the examiners and the candidate – the supervisor is there to clarify' (C#47). Other instances where the supervisor should be allowed to speak is 'when there is direct controversy in which the student may note that the direction of the research or the analysis was based on advice from supervisors and the examiners seek clarification' (C#53). Some convenors were of the view

that supervisors should be invited to engage in a broader conversation ‘as happens at a good oral’ (C#13), but definitely not answer questions for the candidate.

What seems clear is the duty of care portrayed by the convenors, who allowed a supervisor to speak when ‘emotional or psychological breakdown of the candidate is actual or impending’ (C#4). In some cases, it could be that the student becomes ‘upset, agitated or flustered’ (C#2) or ‘distressed and nervous’ (C#1). Supervisors should be allowed to contribute when ‘examiners attack the candidate and the convenor’ (Sv#1). In other cases, supervisors are there to ensure that there is no breach of the process; in such cases, they may speak even without the invitation of the convenor. Regardless of the circumstances, convenors made it very clear that supervisors being allowed to speak is not ‘construed as allowing them to influence a normal process and it is rather an exception than a norm’ (C#19).

According to one convenor, one strong reason for allowing the supervisor to speak is to clarify when an examiner ‘may have a misconception about a fundamental assumption of the thesis and will not listen to the candidate’ (C#2). A convenor provided an example of such occurrence as being when ‘an examiner states a method is not appropriate and the candidate has explained why it is – if the examiner is digging their toes in, I will ask the supervisor’s view on it’ (C#44).

### ***VOICE FOR DIALOGUE AND KNOWLEDGE CONSTRUCTION***

The theme regarding the need to build the capacity for a supervisor to speak during an oral exam demonstrates a quintessential purpose of a doctoral journey – to create valuable knowledge via intellectual discourse. The majority of the stakeholders were of the opinion that involving supervisors’ voices is a way to create a platform for open dialogue and discussion of candidates’ work.

The phrases convenors used to describe supervisors’ voice included ‘this is how science is advanced’ (C#4) and ‘in science frank discussion is pretty important to get to an understanding’. A senior convenor, when asked if the oral should be a frank and open discussion with supervisor participation, quipped, ‘What else would it be? Deceptive and closed?’ (C#7). Another retorted, ‘If it’s not about scholarly discussion, then we should use multi-choice test in the oral!’ (C#33). What appears to be pertinent here is that there is a view that the oral should be an opportunity for academic discussion among stakeholders, including supervisors. Additionally, convenors expect the general environment to be pleasant and supportive and that it should provide a positive learning experience. Another convenor commented that the oral is a chance for the student to ‘talk about their work with the only other people who know it well ... everybody is working together to make it the best thesis possible. It is not a test’ (C#13).

Others who were supportive of this view, however, cautioned that the supervisor should not dominate the discussion and that the student should not ‘fade in the discussion’ (C#7). It should also not be ‘derailed by vociferous examiners’ (C#62). Examiners too had views on supervisors, feeling that if supervisors were allowed to speak, they would make useful contributions to the discussion and comment on any difficulties that the student may have encountered.

### ***THE RATIONALE FOR ABSENCE AND/OR SILENCE***

The idea that supervisors’ voice should be heard and that they should take part in an open dialogue offers a radical new direction in redefining the role of supervisors during the viva from those stakeholders’ perspectives. However, a handful of participants either completely negated or expressed caution regarding these practices. Some senior convenors described the presence of supervisors as ‘awkward’, as they are expected to sit in the room like ‘revered statues’ (C#44). For one, the ‘candidate always looks to the supervisors for reassurance – they should be independent by now’ (C#52); for another, candidates should be ‘emotionally resilient’ (C#56).

Convenors also noted that it may be awkward for supervisors to keep quiet, especially when a candidate's shortcoming may be because of supervision or that the examiners have 'got it all wrong' (C#3). Convenors who did not support the presence of supervisors expressed concern for the student and the supervisor; they were of the strong view that if the student-supervisor relationship had broken down, it would not be helpful for the supervisor to be present. Convenors who were against the idea of a supervisor attending an oral mentioned that the presence of the supervisor 'will create additional pressure for the candidate' (C#19). Some convenors also said that they had had problems with supervisors 'who talked incessantly', especially when the examiners were considered 'attacking' their student. Other convenors supported this view and added that they would allow a supervisor to attend 'only if the supervisor is gagged' (C#3). Additionally, there were concerns among convenors 'that the supervisor may act as an examiner' (C#12).

A few supervisors were of the view that supervisors need to consider the oral as a 'transitioning process to becoming an independent researcher' (Sv#2), and thus should 'let the bird out of the nest' (Sv#8). In addition, the views of the supervisors were that the thesis is the candidate's work and the candidate should be able to speak to it on their own without the presence of the supervisor. Supervisors who preferred not to attend the oral stated that, at times, their presence could be emotionally challenging, especially when students put them down, saying 'I wanted to do that, but my supervisors advised me against it!' (Sv#10). A junior supervisor commented that she felt 'undermined and intimidated if convenors or examiners who are more senior ask for clarification – I feel that I am under examination!' (Sv#4).

There were also supervisors ( $n = 4$ ) who did not want to speak during the oral as they were of the opinion that their student was a 'big boy/big girl now' and 'they should be able to stand on their own feet' (Sv#7). In other words, supervisors were confident that their student had the expertise and skills to address any concerns raised by examiners. Surprisingly, some also commented that they were frustrated that they were not permitted to participate in an academic discussion that would benefit everyone present at the oral. One of the reasons for this is that some convenors were of the opinion that the oral is not the place for a detailed interaction with the supervisor. Many feared that the supervisor would start defending their candidate or dominate the discussion because of their passion for the project. There was also the worry that the supervisor may play a more prominent role in the oral.

Some examiners commented that 'the presence of supervisors may restrict the candidate from being frank as it might be disrespectful to put their supervisors down' (E#10). Examiners also commented that, at times, it would be difficult to 'criticise the student or the thesis as the supervisors are your colleagues' (E#2); in other words, the presence of supervisors might provide positive emotional support to the candidate but may result in a delicate 'face-saving' (E#1) experience for the examiner.

The four students who did not want their supervisor to attend echoed the views of the supervisors, in the sense that 'I would be under undue stress if asked to respond to something which was my supervisor's idea – I do not want to embarrass them' (St#1). Examiners may claim that it is the student's thesis and the student should be accountable but 'it is always the supervisor's voice and identity that is dominant in the thesis' (St#9). Another student was fearful that, if the supervisor attended, 'the supervisor's body language may make me feel uncomfortable' (St#4). One also cautioned that if supervisory relations are strained, it would be best for supervisors not to attend the oral as 'it would create unnecessary emotional apprehensions' (S#12).

## DISCUSSION

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The objective of this study is to reassess the role of supervisors in the doctoral viva from the stakeholders' perspectives. The two questions regarding whether the supervisor should be, first, physically present in the oral examination, and second, able to voice opinions, guided the subthemes of the study. Regarding the first, 73.40% answered in the affirmative, supported by two subthemes: psycho-

emotional support and procedural/regulation support. This suggests that supervisors' presence in oral examinations is warranted by the important role that their presence plays.

The next two themes – a voice for psycho-emotional and technical support and a voice for dialogue and knowledge construction – serve to redefine the supervisors' role in a somewhat radical manner. The final theme of the study discusses the rationale for not having supervisors in oral examinations or practicing caution regarding their presence.

Opinions as to whether supervisors should attend the oral exam were mostly positive, while those regarding them being invited to have a voice were more restrained. Nevertheless, the radical suggestion offered by those who supported the supervisor's voice in the viva is a novel finding. Giving some voice to supervisors during oral examinations would facilitate an open intellectual discussion that would contribute to knowledge construction and achieve the fundamental purpose of doctoral education. These respondents were of the view that when the supervisor and student co-construct learning over the period of candidature, the journeying should continue in an appropriate scholarly manner in the viva as well, as a rite of passage in itself.

The first two themes focus on the affective and technical roles that the supervisor's presence may play during oral exams. In summary, from all stakeholders' perspectives, the advantages of the supervisor being present are that the supervisor can provide feedback on the student's performance, take notes on any required amendments or for future publications, and offer moral and psychological support (Tinkler & Jackson, 2000; Wellington, 2021). It is evident in the literature that a viva as an exam not only requires intellectual presence but also a thriving emotional presence as it is a demonstration of behavioural as well as cognitive performance (including reading, listening, and speaking) (Kumar et al., 2021). The role of the supervisor in supporting a student's psychological needs is not limited to doctoral studies and after the viva (Kumar et al., 2022) but also extends to during the viva.

The viva is an intellectual exercise that allows participants to agree to disagree, which can be challenging for candidates (Houston, 2018; Murray, 2015). For example, a candidate with a language barrier may need a question reframed, and the supervisor can usually help with this as they have spent long hours communicating with the candidate during the candidature. The supervisor's presence also contributes by clearly comprehending recommendations, the timeline for amendments, and the revisions required by the examiners. Although silent, supervisors play a very useful role in capturing the views of the examiners that may prove useful in post-oral revisions.

However, what is striking in the findings is the radical thought offered by the stakeholders that seeks to transcend the customary 'smile and nod' role of supervisors to the systemic privilege of allowing 'their voices to be heard, perhaps at the end of the viva. Many participants, and more importantly, students and convenors, were of the opinion that allowing supervisors' voices to be heard would not only facilitate candidates' performance by building affirmation and assurance through psychological and moral support but also support an opportunity for discussion. The participants shared strong views that the oral exam is an opportunity for supervisors to contribute further as it is part of the science. What is evident from the discussion on the oral being a frank and open discussion is how it is interpreted by the stakeholders, including institutional policies regarding oral exams. There appear to be two strong views: one is that it is an opportunity for a collegial and frank discussion, which entails both feedback and feedforward. As mentioned by Kumar and Stracke (2018), the examination is a form of teaching, and the role of the supervisor does not end when the thesis is submitted and examined. Supervisors still need to ensure 'closure', and they can only do this if they are active participants in the process of knowledge creation and co-construction. It is difficult for a supervisor to be a silent observer who does not have the opportunity to seek clarification from the examiners if there are mandatory amendments that might be against what the supervisors have advised; this is where a collegial and frank discussion would be of immense benefit. The candidate would also have the opportunity to contribute or seek clarification. What is essential, as a point with which the authors of

this paper agree, is that the focus should be on the project – the involvement of the supervisors should not be a case of supervisor versus examiner.

The voices that opposed the presence of supervisors, although few, should not be ignored. Students may feel their supervisor's presence curtails them from evolving into independent researchers or restricts their free and frank presentation, and this should be considered in allowing supervisors to be present in oral examinations. These objections could be mitigated by setting up clear rules and regulations regarding the supervisor's role during the examination. It is rare but entirely possible that students may find the presence of their supervisor disruptive. If students know from the beginning that supervisors will be present during the oral examination, they are mentally prepared for it. Similarly, in the absence of clear instructions and policies, supervisors' voices may interrupt the viva in detrimental ways. The student, as attested earlier, may also keep looking to the supervisor for reassurance. An alternative would be for the supervisors not to be present in the examination room but to be in a different room. Wellington (2021, p. 75) proposes that '... the supervisor is out of sight but still be able to listen and therefore out of mind'. Allowing supervisors to speak only after the presentation and examination are over, for 'closure', would give a much-needed voice to supervisors and at the same not interrupt the examination. An open discussion among examiners, supervisors, and convenors on the research topic after the viva would contribute to the refinement and improvement of a thesis without superseding students' prospects of becoming independent scholars (Kumar et al., 2021).

This study was an opportunity to further our understanding of the 'anatomy of a doctoral viva' (Trafford & Leshem, 2002) and examine a comprehensive picture of the supervisor's role in a doctoral oral exam from all stakeholders' perspectives. The data from this study clearly points to the direction of incorporating the role of the supervisor when the viva is theorised (Delamont et al., 1998; Park, 2003).

## CONCLUSION

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The aim of the study was to examine the perspectives of convenors, examiners, supervisors, and candidates to gather their views as to the presence of the supervisor in oral examinations and to reassess the role of the mainly silent supervisor in the doctoral viva. The premise for this study was that supervisors are central to candidates' doctoral journey, and their roles have been well-documented. However, supervisors' role in the doctoral viva remains elusive, insignificant, and misunderstood. Ninety-four participants, including convenors, examiners, supervisors, and candidates, participated in this study. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and an open-ended survey, which was later analysed using qualitative methods. The findings offer two main explanations that warrant supervisors' physical presence in oral examinations: psycho-emotional support and procedural/regulatory purposes. Supervisors' voices serve psycho-emotional and technical purposes and aid in dialogue and knowledge construction. However, currently, most universities exclude supervisors away from oral examinations. Hence, the findings provide a new perspective on oral examinations and explore a greater role for the supervisors, which includes their presence in oral examinations as well. The findings have implications for the doctoral viva and policies that seek to make it a collegial and equitable practice. For example, at the macro level, university policies should be encouraged to redefine and clearly articulate the supervisors' rights, roles, and responsibilities during the doctoral viva of their candidate. As the findings suggested, the physical presence of the supervisor is meaningful for the candidates' overall functioning during the viva.

## LIMITATIONS

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Like every study, ours has its limitations. The caveat that should be considered prior to interpreting the results is that the participants were drawn from a research university that upholds liberal and democratic practices for the conduct of the viva.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

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To broaden the generalisability of these findings, future research is needed from diverse cultural, institutional, and disciplinary contexts to advance our understanding of the supervisor's role during oral exams. Similarly, considering the fact that a viva is primarily a student event, more students' voices should be sought and heard in future studies. Another question that could be investigated is whether supervisors should have a more active role independent of what a convenor may desire.

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