Title: **Supporting research students to prepare for their viva – a new online tool**

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Abstract:

Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:
- identify the main issues and difficulties which research students experience in preparation for their research viva
- explain the main features and applications of the Interviewer Viva software
- use the software and understand its main features
- discuss whether or how far this software (and/or similar approaches to students' skill development) can be applied in their own institutional context
- identify further avenues for development using this approach.

Session Outline

Key issues to be addressed are:

1. How do research students anticipate their viva?
The examination of their postgraduate dissertation is seen by many students as a mysterious process – a 'black box' (Kiley and Mullins, 2006) The viva is particularly challenging, especially for students who come to postgraduate study in the UK from cultures where this practice is not employed.

2. How can we prepare students to perform at their best in this setting?
There are some very useful handbooks for students which introduce the typical process (e.g. Wisker, 2007) but these can only give a general introduction – they cannot give students the full flavour of the real experience. We can of course run mock vivas in preparation for the real thing but this is time-consuming and likely to be a one-off experience for an individual student. We need cost-effective learning activities which simulate the dynamics of the real situation and which can augment the support we already offer.

3. What can Interviewer Viva offer to students?
This session will demonstrate and allow participants to engage with this software. Interviewer Viva allows students to practise and reflect upon their responses to the high-level questions which are often experienced as the most challenging in the real viva. We have created a series of sessions which challenge students to respond to questions covering major aspects of their thesis (research design, significance of results etc.) and receive feedback onscreen which

will help them to review their performance. Feedback from students who have used the software systematically before their real viva shows that this can have a substantial impact on their performance

4. How can we further develop or adapt this approach for different institutional contexts. We will invite feedback from the delegates and comment on the implications of this approach for the way we support our research students.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

Introductory presentation = 15 minutes
This will explain the rationale underpinning the software and its structure. We will also comment on the feedback we have received from users to date.

Demonstration and opportunity to use/evaluate the software = 15 minutes
Assuming that a fair proportion of the participants bring along a laptop with webcam, we will ask them to work in groups of 2 or 3 through at least one section of the software and collate their comments and reactions.

Discussion of implications and future developments = 15 minutes.
As well as collecting reactions and comments from the previous section, this discussion will focus on key questions including:
- does the software cover the key issues which research students and examiners experience in real vivas?
- how can this sort of software be most effectively used by students from different types and backgrounds?
- how can this approach be used by research supervisors?

References

Kiley, M., and Mullins, G. (2006). "Opening the black box: How examiners assess your thesis." In C. Denholm & T. Evans (Eds.), *Doctorates down under: Keys to successful doctoral study in Australia and New Zealand* (pp. 200-207). Melbourne: ACER.
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Wisker, G. (2007). *The Postgraduate Research Handbook: Succeed with your MA, MPhil, EdD and PhD*. Second edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan