

VIVA VOCE FUNCTIONS, ITS DILUTION, AND CONTRIBUTION TO THE PROLIFERATION OF PREDATORY UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

Since the Middle Ages, it has been a custom in universities to examine doctoral candidates orally through a “viva voce”. In this way, the doctoral examination consists of two components: a written thesis and a viva voce. Despite justifiable differences between universities around the world, the practice of the viva voce has changed from time to time. In general, the rigour and impact have diminished to such extent that, there is now an emerging practice of not holding a viva at all. In this paper I focus on the impact that the dilution of the viva can or might have on the selected classical functions of the viva. I also explore the possible link between this dilution and the proliferation of predatory universities. Using a qualitative approach, I conclude that the dilution of the viva voce undermines its classical functions and broadly contributes to the proliferation of predatory universities. I, therefore, recommend African universities that are in the process of establishing doctoral programmes to attach great importance to the viva voce examination.

Key words: viva voce, doctorate, thesis, dissertation, attribute, predatory, university

Introduction

It is generally agreed that the path to a doctorate¹ is a unique one, in which each candidate has his/her own experience. This very personal

¹ In this paper, the term “doctorate” refers to a doctoral degree which is defined as the highest academic degree. This can be in different forms and nominations such as Ph.D, LL.D, DLitt., DPhil., DSc., etc and include the traditional academic doctorates, professional doctorates, etc.

learning experience is the essence of the doctorate as it prepares the candidate to become an independent researcher (Ayiro and Sang, 2011), among other attributes. The uniqueness of the doctorate concerns several aspects of the doctorate itself, the relationship between the candidate and the supervisor(s), the doctorateness, and the doctoral regulations, to name a few. As far as doctoral regulations are concerned, they differ from university to university, but especially from country to country. Nevertheless, the international nature of the doctoral degree is recognised throughout the world, with the title “doctor” being considered a sign of eliteness in the academic world (Holbrook et al., 2004).

One of the different aspects of the doctorate concerns the requirements and conditions. These differ to such an extent that people with equivalent degrees may have undergone substantially different training and examination. A typical example of such differences is the viva voce requirements. Literally translated from Latin as “living voice” or “live voice”, the viva was originally used in Catholic seminary education and referred to the oral examination (Markulis and Strang, 2008; Afful, 2017). With the aim of testing, challenging, and critically evaluating students actual knowledge, the viva was not used as a substitute for the written examination, but rather as a complement to it (Markulis and Strang, 2008; Aful, 2017). The practice of the viva was then extended, and is now customarily used in doctoral education.

In the academic jargon, the viva voce is usually referred to as a finish line, the crossing line, rite of passage, academic discussion between the candidate and examiners, etc. Universities around the world apply different policies, rules, and regulations to the viva. In this respect, there are not only inconsistencies between countries, but also between universities within a country. An example of this is the United Kingdom (UK), where policies and practices for the viva are largely inconsistent (Badley, 2009).

Without belittling the contemporary discrepancies, a comparison between past and present practices reveals a major difference. The general assumption is that in the past the viva was conducted with great rigour and was highly regarded as one of the toughest conditions for awarding a doctorate to a candidate. From time to time, and for one or more reasons, the viva has lost its rigour and impact. In the words of Sojen and Marcian (2009), the “viva voce is one of the traditional

educational assessment tools which has lost its prominence over the years². The loss of prominence is so severe that today a candidate can obtain a doctorate without having taken a viva.² It is this dilution of the viva which is the subject of this paper. The main purpose is to reflect on what impact this dilution may have on the classical functions of the viva. Beyond the classical functions, this paper also looks at other negative consequences of the diluted viva voce, such as the proliferation of predatory universities.

There is a relatively growing research literature on viva voce (see, for example, Poole, 2015; Tussime, 2019; Baldacchino, 1995; Boudjelal and Zoulikha, 2020, to name but a few). To date, however, there has been little work looking at the impact of dilution on the classical functions of viva voce. The concept of predatory universities is also only pseudo-documented and studies on the impact of the diluted viva on the proliferation of predatory universities are virtually non-existent.

For this reason, in this paper I examine the impact of the dilution of the viva on the classical functions of the viva; and the relationship between the diluted viva and the proliferation of predatory universities. In doing so, I lay the foundation for this paper by showing how the viva has become less important over time. I also show how this dilution has had a negative impact on the fulfilment of the viva's classical functions. In particular, I address what I call 'predatory universities' to show how the dilution of the viva can, or most likely will lead, to the proliferation of predatory universities. All these objectives are discussed with a focus on the African context. My main objective, then, is to advise African universities, especially those in sub-saharan African whose development of doctoral programmes is relatively recent (Botha, 2022), on the importance to attach to the viva voce in the development of their programmes. The main question of this paper is therefore: Should African universities attach great importance to the viva voce or should they attach less importance to it as it is an emerging trend?

In writing this paper, I have made extensive use of a qualitative methodology based on an analytical and conceptual approach. To this

² A doctorate conferred without having experienced a viva voce in this paper excludes posthumous doctorates.

end, I have thoroughly reviewed the available documents on viva voce. These are divided into two: Primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources were first-hand information, such as universities' doctoral regulations, manuals, frameworks, etc. Secondary sources consisted of scholarly research articles, dissertations, etc.

This paper is divided into six sections. In section one, I begin with an introduction. Then, in section two, I examine the literature on the nature and functions of viva voce. In section three, I briefly discuss the dilution of viva voce from past practices to present practices. In section four, I reflect on the implications of that dilution for the fulfilment of the classical functions of viva voce. In section five, I discuss the possible link between the diluted viva voce and the proliferation of predatory universities. In section six, I draw a conclusion and make recommendations.

The nature and functions of the viva voce

Several scholars have so far documented research on the nature of viva voce and there is a growing research literature on its functions. In this section, I briefly discuss the nature of viva voce. I then discuss the functions of viva voce.

The nature of the viva voce

Numerous scholars have studied the nature of viva voce. For example, Watts (2012) cites Burnham (1994) and Morlye et al. (2002), Rugg & Peter (2004), and Delamont et al. (2004), who respectively describe the viva as mysterious, unpredictable, and potentially frightening. The viva is also seen as rigorous and seriously challenging, as is doctoral study (Trafford and Leshem, 2009). The viva is also described as an opportunity for candidates to defend their research and doctoral thesis (Trafford and Leshem, 2009). Baldacchino describes the viva as a part of the doctoral process that concerns the relationship between the candidate and the examiners, as opposed to other parts of the doctoral process where the relationship is mainly between the candidate and the supervisor(s) (Baldacchino, 1995).

Wellington describes the viva as the oral counterpart to the dissertation, and the end point of the quest for the doctorate (Wellington, 2013). From this description of the viva by Wellington, two aspects of

the viva voce can be highlighted: final nature and oral examination nature.

Beginning with the final nature, scholars have described the viva as the final examination that marks the end point of the doctoral journey (Watts, 2012; Tusiime, 2019; Afful, 2017; Botha, 2022b. Ayiro and Sang (2011) describe the candidate's defence of the thesis' arguments as a typical form of doctoral examination. This very final nature of the viva can be inferred from Lee, who describes the chronological order of the doctoral supervision process as starting from recruitment to the viva as the final assessment (Lee, 2018). Other harsh words are also used to describe the viva as a difficult mark of the end of the journey. This is the case with Watts (2012), who refers to the viva as the "final hurdle".

As for the oral examination nature, this is generally accepted by scholars (Watts, 2012; Trafford and Leshem, 2009; Poole, 2015; Tusiime, 2019; Torke et al., 2010). Indeed, on average, a viva lasts between one and three hours (Tusiime, 2019), with the essential content part consisting of the interaction between the examiners' questions and the candidate's answers (Watts, 2012). Not only scholars, but also the doctoral regulations of some universities qualify the viva as an oral examination. This is the case, for example, with the University of Rwanda, whose Framework and Regulations for the Award of Higher Degrees by Research (2014), the General Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Studies (2018), and the Doctor of Philosophy General Programme Structure (2018) stipulate that a doctoral thesis must be defended in an oral examination to the satisfaction of the examiners.

In addition to university regulations, higher education regulators also recognise the examination nature of the viva. This is the case, for example, with the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education, which in September 2015 issued a Statement on the Characteristics of the Doctoral Degree, which includes a Quality Code for Higher Education. In this statement, the candidate's performance in the oral examination (viva voce) is taken into account, together with the thesis, to decide on the award of the doctoral degree. The same document also explicitly states that the doctoral assessment in the UK is a combination of the thesis and the oral examination.

That being the nature of the viva voce, scholars have also documented research on the functions of the viva voce, as detailed in the next paragraphs.

The functions of the viva voce

There are several functions of the viva. Tusiime (2019) has listed some functions of viva voce as follows: For the candidate, the viva is an opportunity to defend the originality of his/her work, to expand and clarify his/her ideas, and to show that he/she has conducted the research independently. For the examiners, the viva is an opportunity to test the authenticity of the written research, to check the candidate's understanding of the area of his/her study, and to examine the candidate's research communication skills (Tusiime, 2019). Watts (2012) refers to Potter (2006) who summarises three functions of the viva, namely: to test whether the thesis is the candidate's own work, to test the candidate's ability to defend his/her work as a professional researcher, and to allow the candidate to clarify some elements that might be subject of misunderstanding or misinterpretation.

In this paper, I limit myself to the three functions discussed by scholars as key functions of the viva. The trigger for the discussions is the impact that the diluted practice of viva voce may have on these three classical functions. This discussion is done in section four, but before that I discuss the diluted practice of viva voce in the next section.

The dilution of the viva voce

Understanding the dilution of viva voce can be elaborated on through the regulatory practices of viva voce, which are herein split into two: past practices and current practices.

The practice of the viva voce in the past

In the Netherlands, it is a requirement at several, if not all, universities that the doctoral candidate defends his/her thesis together with two paranympths, one on the left and another on the right. The assistance of two paranympths is quasi-mandatory, as it is explicitly provided for in the doctoral regulations of Dutch universities. It is also so common that not to do so would be seen not only a violation of the doctoral regulations but also a breach of academic custom. This Dutch practice might pique the curiosity of many people to understand the *raison d'être* for the two paranympths defence.

The reason for the Dutch system of defending with two paranympths' assistance has a long tradition. It dates back to the past, when the viva voce was very confrontational. At that time, there could

be fights between the candidate and the examination committee or between the members of the examination committee themselves about a topic or a statement made by the candidate. The fights were in defence of science and for the candidate, who used to be alone, it was very unfair to engage in such fights for science. Thus, the idea of paranymphs came into being to assist the candidate in case he/she was attacked by the members of the examination committee or other participants.

Over time, civilisation disciplined scientists not to engage in physical altercations, but the Dutch doctoral system retained the system of the paranymphs as a symbol that the viva voce is the defence of science, which can sometimes even be seriously confrontational. The paranymphs also provide moral support to the candidate, and can sometimes help by, for example, reading out sentences in the dissertation on behalf of the candidate. Beyond that, the eminence and rigour attached to the viva has diminished over time. That adds to the fact that there is no uniform practice for the viva today across the universities of the world.

The current practices of the viva voce

The conduct of a viva voce as part of a doctoral examination is a widely accepted custom in several universities around the world (Tusiime, 2019, Mirza, 2016). At the University of Rwanda, the viva is not only considered as a component of the examination, but as a second examination, while the assessment of the written dissertation is considered as the first examination (Framework and regulations for the award of higher degrees, 2014; General Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Studies, 2018; Doctor of Philosophy Degree General Programme Structure, 2018). The same is true in Kenyan universities, where the viva voce examination is considered an integral part of the doctoral process (Ayiro and Sang, 2011). Nonetheless, universities have different practices and there are currently wide variations, which, in other words, mark the differences in the examination of doctoral awards. In this paper, I discuss the current practice of viva voce in relation to the universities' requirements.

In this regard, viva voce regulations are diverse and varied throughout the world. In the UK, for example, the viva is a closed event (UK Quality Code for Higher Education, 2015; Wellington, 2013; Remenyi, 2019), while in several countries on the European continent

(Botha, 2022b) such as the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Austria, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and several African countries such as Rwanda, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, etc, it is a public event. Given this diversity, viva requirements can be grouped into three: strict requirements, medium requirements, and no viva requirements. All three are discussed below.

Starting with the strict requirements, this is about the universities that require a doctoral candidate to defend his/her thesis before a committee that is rigorously constituted, with a defence that is confrontational, and that seriously affects the awarding of the doctorate or not. This is the case in British universities, where several viva results are possible. One can be 'pass', which means that the candidate is awarded the doctorate. The second can be 'pass with major corrections' or 'pass with minor corrections', which means that the candidate will be awarded the doctorate on condition that he/she attends to some issues that can be of editorial, factual, or textual nature, to the satisfaction of the examining member(s) or supervisor(s). The third can be 'no pass', which means that the candidate is either given the opportunity to revise and resubmit his/her thesis, or is not awarded the doctoral degree, i.e. 'fails'.

The medium requirements practice refers to the practices of universities that require a viva, but with mitigations. An example of such a mitigation is a ceremonial viva that has very limited impact on the awarding of the doctorate or not. This is the case in Dutch universities, where the viva is considered and described as a ceremony. The same practice exists in several European countries where the outcome of the award is already known, so that the viva is seen as both a defence of the thesis and a ceremony (UK Quality Code for Higher Education, 2015). In such systems, passing is the rule, while failing is a very rare exception. In fact, in this respect, passing the viva is taken so much for granted that failure to pass becomes a scandal. An example of this is the recent case at Tilburg University, where the University administration, after confirming that the defence is part of the procedure for awarding the doctoral degree, described the case of a candidate who failed the defence as an exceptional, unusual, and unexpected event (Tilburg University, 2021).

Some other universities do not require a viva at all. This is the case with some South African universities such as the University of

South Africa (UNISA), where section 2.4 and section 5.23 of the Procedures for Master's and Doctoral Degrees state the principle of 'no viva', while the viva is an exception that requires College Board approval and prior notification to the student at the time of registration (UNISA, 2018). The Central University of Technology's 2021 Manual for Research Development and Postgraduate Studies Support of the Central University of Technology also provides for this option by mentioning that the doctoral candidate may be required to defend his/her thesis orally (Central University of Technology, 2021). In Australia, there is usually no viva voce examination and the thesis is considered the primary and only evidence for the award of the doctorate (Holbrook, 2004). The UK system also used to be like this before it changed to its present form. The reason for this was that it was implicitly assumed that the candidate deserved the degree once the thesis was written and submitted (Joyner, 2003).

At such universities, the viva is not a requirement, and does not take place at all. This means that a viva has no bearing on the candidate's possibilities to pass or earn the doctorate. The common practice at these universities is that a student, who has written a thesis to the satisfaction of the supervisor(s), submits the written text for examination, and the outcome of the examiners' reading of the written text determines whether or not doctorate is awarded.

Still on the universities where the viva is not the rule, it must be mentioned that there are also universities where the viva is optional. This is the case at the University of Otago in New Zealand, where the viva is not compulsory, except in some departments or at the request of the candidate or the examiners (Sharmini et al., 2015). The same practice exists at the University of Kwazulu Natal, where the doctoral examination is based solely on the written thesis, while the oral examination remains optional (Ayiro and Sang, 2011). There are also some systems where the viva is compulsory only in certain cases, such as professional clinical doctorates, where the candidate prepares and is assessed on a portfolio containing a clinical research project (UK Quality Code for Higher Education, 2015).

Apart from university regulations, scholars have also described current practice in different ways. Watts (2012), for example, describes the current practice of viva voce as a secretive form with myriad manifestations. Furthermore, it is important to note that the three groups

mentioned above about the current practices of viva voce change from time to time. In the UK, for example, the system has changed mainly from no viva requirements to viva requirements over the past fifty years (Joyner, 2003).

That being the case of viva voce, more especially with regard to its current practice, it is imperative to discuss the possible implications between the dilution of viva voce and the fulfilment of the viva functions. This is the subject of the next section.

The diluted viva voce and the viva voce functions

In the previous sections, I have mentioned some of the functions of viva voce that have been highlighted by scholars. In this section, I discuss the impact of the diluted importance of the viva on the achievement of the classical functions of the viva.

Function 1: Verifying whether the thesis is the candidate's own work

It is indisputable that a doctoral thesis, the positive assessment of which earns a candidate a doctorate, must be authored by that very individual candidate as an expression of his/her own independent research (McKenna, 2017). In this way, the viva allows examiners to test the authenticity of the candidate's work (Botha, 2022b), by verifying the candidate's ownership of the work that is being assessed in order to award him/her a doctorate. The candidate's ownership is assessed by his/her ability to discuss and defend what he/she has written (Tusiime, 2019). This is enshrined in the UK system, where it is explicitly highlighted that one of the purposes of the viva is to verify the candidate's "authorship of the thesis and engagement with the described research process" (UK Quality Code for Higher Education, 2015).

This function is very critical as it allows the candidate to be mindful of the implications of the thesis defence. Indeed, with this function, the candidate becomes aware that the submission of the written text is not sufficient to obtain a doctorate (Watts, 2012).

In the absence of a viva, the fulfilment of this function becomes very critical in publication-based thesis (PBT). In this type of doctorates, when the publications are multi-authored, it becomes difficult to determine the intellectual contribution of the candidate. Therefore, the viva would be a good opportunity for the examiners to determine the

candidate's contribution and an opportunity for the candidate to convince the examiners that he/she has a good mastery of the published work (Sharmini et al., 2015).

With reference to Wellington (2013), who refers to the viva as the oral counterpart of the doctoral dissertation, the assessment of whether the candidate's own work merits a doctorate should be given the same importance as the oral examination, i.e. the viva. This is also justified by the fact that the viva, in parallel with the written dissertation, allows examiners the opportunity to assess whether the candidate has made an original contribution to knowledge (Trafford and Leshem, 2009).

Function 2: Testing the candidate's ability to defend his/her work as a professional researcher

It is commonly said that the outcome of a doctorate is neither the thesis nor the degree, but the doctor him/herself. This understanding justifies the emphasis on some of the candidate's attributes that must be examined before the doctoral degree is awarded. One of the doctoral attributes and skills to look for in a doctoral candidate is the ability to respond to constructive feedback, communicate effectively, persevere, show self-confidence and a sense of independence (Sharmini et al., 2015). In my view, the viva is a good opportunity for the candidate to prove these attributes and also an opportunity for the examiners to assess the candidate's level in relation to these attributes. And without a viva, it becomes difficult to assess these attributes.

In 2015, Poole investigated several universities in the UK and found that many university documents in the UK refer to the viva as an examination, but also as an opportunity for the candidate to defend his/her work (Poole, 2015). It is also an opportunity to demonstrate a claim to scholarship alongside the written thesis (Trafford and Leshem, 2009). Indeed, during a viva, a candidate can demonstrate his/her ability to actively engage in academic discussions with peers (Tusiime, 2019), particularly by articulately defending his/her work under stress (Botha, 2022b). Defending his/her thesis as a professional researcher also means that the candidate must demonstrate his/her "deep knowledge and understanding of the field of study and originality of thought" by creating new knowledge or applying existing knowledge in new ways (UK Quality Code for Higher Education, 2015).

The Inter-University Council for East Africa published in 2015 the East African Qualifications Framework for higher Education. Matrix 2.4 entitled EAQFHE Qualifications type specifications, details the purpose, knowledge, skills, application of knowledge and skills, and learning volume (credits) for each qualification type. Regarding the doctorate, the matrix states that a doctoral graduate should have “communication skills to present cogently a complex investigation of originality or original research for external examination against international standards and to communicate results to peers and the community”. Opining from an East African context, the viva is the most important, if not the only, opportunity to assess these skills of the candidate. In this sense, it would be very difficult to digest how these skills can be tested in the candidate if there is no viva at the end of the doctoral journey.

Function 3: to give the candidate the opportunity to clarify some elements that could be misunderstood or misinterpreted

According to Wellington (2013), a doctorate becomes real, tangible, and audible in two ways: the written dissertation and the viva voce. This characterisation would imply that the doctorate is not yet complete without a viva, as it is missing an essential part. This makes sense when one considers the second function of the viva: to test the candidate’s ability to defend his/her work as a professional researcher. A so-called professional researcher who cannot defend his/her work is indeed not a professional researcher. From a scientific point of view, a work that cannot be defended scientifically also deserves little credit to be considered a scientific work. And if the candidate is not given the opportunity to defend his/her work, who else can defend it to add that “defendability” element.

In this context, Melrose describes the viva voce as a session in which the candidate not only defends his/her thesis but also clarifies the issues, concerns, and problems that the examiners may have identified in the thesis before making a final decision on the candidate’s outcome (Melrose, 2013). Conversely, a dissertation that is not defended can be subject to several misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Thus, the viva is seen as an opportunity for the candidate to clarify and expand on some ideas and concerns (Botha, 2022b).

In addition, the diluted viva may have other consequences that cannot be addressed here. For example, with no viva voce, there is a risk that supervisors and candidates may focus only on writing the dissertation, and neglect the development of other doctoral attributes. As a result, there is a risk that this type of supervision could lead to the development of the candidates' writing attributes, but not other doctoral attributes. Another risk would be the development of a trap for irresponsible conduct of research, as the candidate can easily engage in irresponsible conduct of research as he/she has little fear of public humiliation. Not only that, but there is also a risk of paving the way for the development of predatory universities, as explained in the next section.

Beyond the functions of viva voce: the proliferation of predatory universities

Beyond the traditional functions of the viva, the diluted viva can have other serious consequences. Without pretending to exhaust all consequences, the focus here is on the proliferation of predatory universities. Unlike the famous concept of "predatory journals", the concept of "predatory universities" might quite be new, at least as far as I know. This justifies a great reference to the definition of predatory journals in order to define what a predatory university is.

As for predatory journals, the term was coined in 2010 by Jeffrey Beall of Colorado University, Denver (Ifijeh, 2017). Although the term is well known and discussed in scientific and academic communities, there is no stand-alone definition for a predatory journal. However, several related definitions exist such as "a subset of scholarly publishing entities that outwardly appear as legitimate scholarly journals, but which do not carry out promised or practices expected of such journals" (Shamseer, 2021). Ifijeh (2017) defined predatory publishing as a business model that charges authors publication fees without performing standard scholarly peer review and editorial services.

In the absence of a stand-alone definition, scholars have attempted to highlight the characteristics of predatory journals, and several of these characteristics are used to define predatory journals. The main common characteristics are being of unethical nature (Shamseer, 2017), money gain motivation, no rejection and fast publishing process, and publication of articles from disparate fields (Ifijeh, 2017), etc.

With reference to predatory journals and their characteristics, one can induce what a predatory university is. As mentioned earlier, the concept itself is new and despite my best efforts, I have not been able to find a scientifically reliable definition of a predatory university. Nonetheless, The New York Times published two editorial opinions on predatory education in 2014.

One was published on 16 April 2014 under the title “Reining in Predatory Schools”. Towards the end, the author stated that in the United States of America, there are certificate programmes that are substandard, that advertise on buses and subways, targeting less sophisticated audience. The author ended calling the American administration to issue strong rules that force such predatory schools to improve or shut down. Another related editorial opinion was published on 21 August 2014 under the title “Get Predatory Colleges out of Job Training”. This spoke of “for-profit educational institutions that leave students with heavy debts and worthless credentials”. It also mentioned the fact that they rip off students with false promises. University World News (2022), recently reported that the Rwanda High Education Council recently issued a public notice advising Rwandans not to enrol or terminate their enrolment in foreign so-called universities that are not internationally accredited. The Rwanda High Education Council has explicitly announced that it does not and will not recognise the credentials of such institutions.

This is a typical picture of predatory universities, which share the same characteristics as predatory publishers, such as false promises, ripping off students/authors, and money motivation. Similarly, predatory universities excel at producing zombie theses as do predatory journals that publish substandard papers. In short, the business of predatory universities is to sell education, as they look like a factory for degrees.

Understanding predatory universities in this way brings us to the issue of predatory universities in the African context. The problem of predatory universities for Africa is twofold. On the one hand, Africans are the first customers of predatory universities to fill the gap created by the low number of educated people in Africa, especially for the doctorates. This is because of the thirst for higher degrees at low cost, due to inability to afford expensive education at prestigious universities. On the other hand, several predatory universities are run by Africans, based either in Africa or abroad.

To return to the topic of this paper, there could be a strong link between the diluted viva and the proliferation of predatory universities. As far as doctoral education is concerned, one of the common features of predatory universities is that they do not require viva voce examinations. Another common feature of predatory universities is the avoidance of physical contact between the candidate and the so-called university. Several predatory universities also advertise that they award the doctorates to candidates without requiring them to leave their places of work or residences. Under these conditions, the absence of a viva voce is a means for predatory universities to defraud thirsty doctoral aspirants.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the plausible implications of the diluted practice of viva voce on the fulfilment of the classical functions of viva voce. The basis of this paper is the great interest that stakeholders attach to the doctoral examination (Joyner, 2003). In order to narrow the scope of the doctoral examination, the paper focused on the viva as one of the classical components of the doctoral examination.

To a certain extent, the changes in the conduct of the viva are quite necessary and justified. This is especially true given the various changes in the meaning of the doctorate, from the early mediaeval conception of the license to teach, i.e. teaching qualification, to the current Humboldtian conception of a research degree, as well as other variants such as the professional and practice based doctorates (Wellington, 2013) as well as PBTs doctorates.

The main objective of this paper has been to formulate a coherent advice for African universities that may be facing two directions: viva voce or no viva. My central advice therefore draws on the discussions I have had in the previous sections. I also refer to a study by Poole on the views of UK academics surveyed on the viva voce, in which he found that academics are generally in favour of the viva voce, and only marginally in favour of its abolition. Taking into account this general view of UK academics, and considering that British universities have been offering doctoral programmes for a long time and obviously have much more experience in this field than African universities, I would advise African universities that are in the process of setting up doctoral programmes to make the viva voce a firm requirement.

The topics I have discussed in this paper are continuous in nature and not time limited. Of course, their interest may change weights in one way or another in the future. Nor can I claim to have exhausted all the related issues, as I humbly claim not to have solved the problem completely. Therefore, more interesting research can be done, for example, on the impact of the diluted viva on doctoral attributes, the future of the viva in doctoral education, the changing nature of the viva and its impact on doctoral supervision, etc. I therefore call on other researchers to dive into the area of viva voce practices to make further recommendations, especially for African universities that are actively involved in establishing doctoral programmes.

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