



Reflective VIVA: Voicing Insight, Validation, and Authenticity through Reflective Vivas in a Postgraduate Dissertation Module

An Active Learning Strategy for Engagement and Academic Integrity at Scale



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Abstract

Reflective VIVA is introduced as a scalable active learning and authenticity strategy in a large postgraduate dissertation module (>700 students). In an environment shaped by AI-generated content, the viva strengthens metacognitive engagement, ensures authorship, and promotes deeper learning. Survey data reveal high student use of AI tools, particularly for efficiency and idea generation. However, perceived benefits to knowledge and research depth are weaker, reinforcing the role of reflective oral assessment in safeguarding rigour, integrity, and meaningful learning

Introduction

Active learning is increasingly recognised as essential to promoting student engagement, critical thinking, and meaningful learning. However, while strategies such as simulations and collaborative tasks are commonly used in taught modules, far less attention has been given to **active learning in dissertation supervision and assessment** — particularly in large-scale postgraduate programmes.

This proposal introduces Reflective VIVA: a structured, reflective viva embedded within a postgraduate dissertation module enrolling over 700 students each year. Implemented across the full cohort in 2023 and 2024, this innovation aimed to move beyond the passive submission of a written thesis by engaging students in an academic dialogue about their research. The viva was designed to promote reflection, reinforce learning ownership, and build students' capacity to articulate and defend their academic decisions.

The pilot was very well received. *Students* valued the opportunity to discuss their work; *supervisors and examiners* reported stronger academic conversations and less academic misconduct cases; and the external examiners praised the viva's contribution to both rigour and integrity in the dissertation process.

The Reflective Viva as Active Learning

- **Voicing insight:** Students are required to articulate their research process, decisions, and learning.

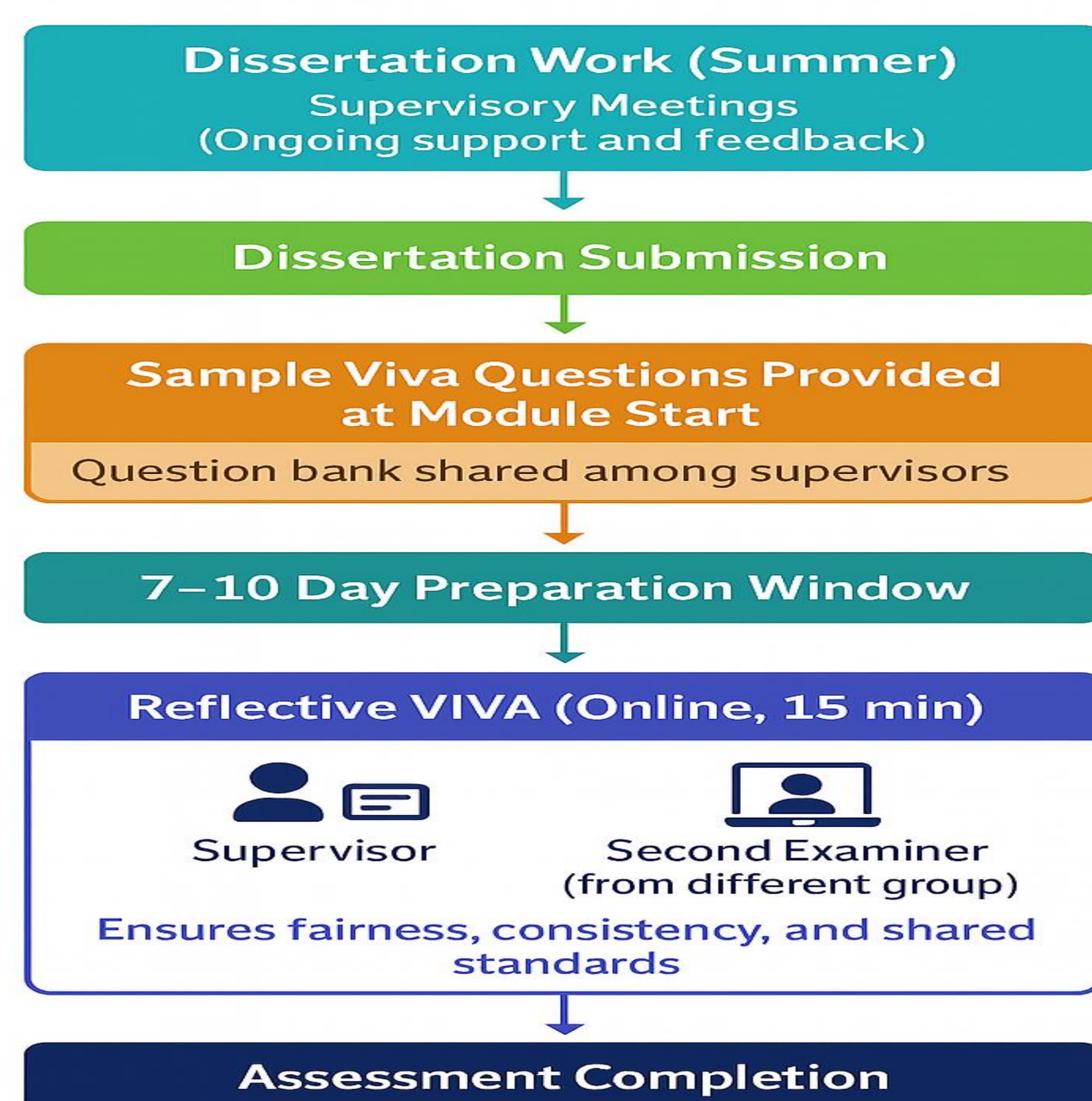
- **Metacognition:** Structured reflection encourages students to assess their own growth and methodological choices.

- **Dialogue and feedback:** The viva opens a space for academic conversation, clarification, and formative insight.

- **Engagement and confidence:** Students report greater connection to their work and improved oral academic skills.

Unlike conventional written assessments, the viva encourages active, student-led engagement with the research journey. It supports skills relevant to both academic and professional settings — including verbal articulation, critical reflection, and self-awareness.

How the Reflective Viva is embedded into the module



Ensuring Authenticity in the Age of AI

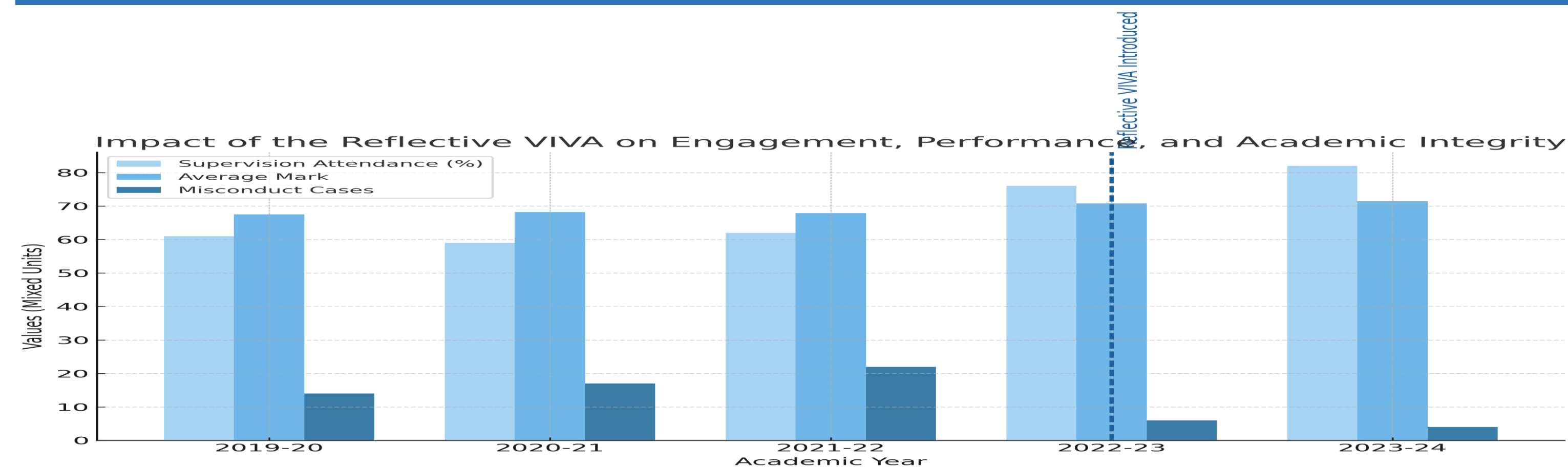
In addition to its pedagogic value, Reflective VIVA also addresses a timely and pressing concern: the impact of AI-generated content and ghostwriting on academic integrity. While written dissertations may be subject to contract cheating or automated generation, the viva provides a **low-tech but high-trust mechanism** for verifying student authorship.

Students must explain and justify their work in real time, responding to questions that assess both understanding and decision-making. This oral element reinforces authenticity, helps deter misconduct, and restores confidence in the assessment process — without compromising inclusivity or student experience. The external examiner explicitly recognised the viva's effectiveness in addressing these risks.

Discussion

- Student performance improved following the introduction of the Reflective VIVA, with average dissertation marks rising from 67.9% (2021–22) to 71.4% (2023–24), suggesting deeper understanding and stronger research ownership.
- Engagement increased, demonstrated by supervision attendance rising from around 60% pre-VIVA to over 80% in post-VIVA years, indicating greater commitment to the research process.
- Academic misconduct cases fell sharply, from 22 cases (2021–22) to 4 cases (2023–24), consistent with evidence that viva-style and authentic assessments reduce opportunities for AI-assisted or contract-cheating practices (Sotiriadou et al., 2020; Kofinas et al., 2024).
- Reflective VIVA strengthens authenticity, student accountability, and integrity, aligning with calls for AI-resilient, dialogic, and learning-oriented assessment design (Brown and Sambell, 2023; Moorhouse et al., 2023; Luckin, 2024).

Impact of the Reflective VIVA on Dissertation Performance, Engagement and Academic Integrity



Purpose

A short online survey will be completed after the viva to evaluate:

- learning and reflection
- engagement and confidence
- perceptions of academic integrity



Closed-Ended Items (1–5 Likert Scale)

- The viva helped me reflect more deeply on my research.
- It encouraged me to assess strengths and limitations.
- I felt confident discussing and defending choices.
- The viva supports academic integrity and authorship.



Open-Ended Questions

Survey responses will provide:

- measurable indicators of impact
- insight into student experience
- guidance for improving the Reflective VIVA

Conclusions

Reflective VIVA offers a scalable, reflective, and dialogic approach to dissertation assessment that supports both student learning and academic integrity. It demonstrates that oral reflection can be successfully integrated into large cohorts and can serve multiple functions: active engagement, metacognition, skill development, and authorship validation.

This case study will be of interest to those involved in curriculum design, dissertation supervision, and academic integrity policy — especially in the context of generative AI and evolving assessment practices.

References

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