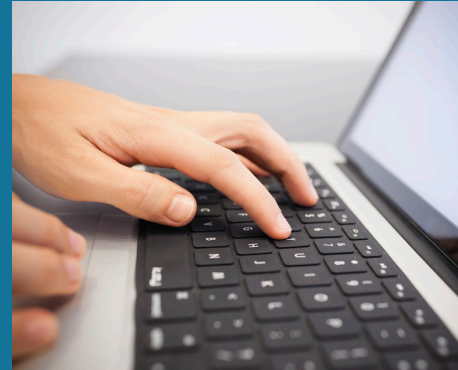




Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University



Thesis Submission and Oral Examination

A DCU Doctoral Student Guide

The purpose of this guide is to assist DCU doctoral research students in their preparations for the *viva voce* (oral) examination. This guide has been developed by the Graduate Studies Office in line with DCU's [Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis](#), and in consultation with the Faculties. Students and their supervisors should also consult with their School, in determining local, and discipline specific, practices and etiquette.

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While every effort has been made to ensure information is correct at the time of publication, the guide is intended as an information resource only. DCU regulations, policies and procedures take precedence at all times and in all cases.

Section 1:

An Overview of the Examination Process

Notification of Intention to Submit

- The University must be given at least three months notice of intention to submit, to allow time for examiners to be formally appointed.
- Notice is given by submitting a completed PGR4 to GRSB (Graduate Research Studies Board).
- This is done by your supervisor and submitted via the Registry Office. The form includes the recommendations for your examiners and you, as the student, can have no involvement in the decisions around examiners.
- You will be asked to provide a 300 word abstract with the PGR4.
- Once the examiners are approved, and they have formally accepted, their appointments are valid for 12 months.
- If you have a particular award ceremony you are aiming for you should be aware of the various submission deadlines: www.dcu.ie/registry/postgraduate/submission_dates.shtml

Submission of Softbound Thesis for Examination

- Once the examiners are approved, you should submit two soft-bound (signed and dated) copies of the thesis to Registry, along with a PGR7 (Thesis Access Consent Form). This should be done following consultation with your supervisor.
- A PDF copy must also be submitted (dated, with your student ID number and watermarked as 'pre-examination copy').
- The thesis should not be sent directly to examiners, either by a supervisor or the student.

Viva Preparation Stage

- A chairperson will be appointed for your examination, and s/he will liaise with you, the examiners and your supervisor regarding the arrangements and procedures surrounding your *viva* examination.
- Refer to section 4 in this guide for further *viva* preparation guidance.

Viva

- The *viva* panel will consist of one internal examiner, at least one external examiner and an independent chairperson.
- The *viva* normally lasts between one and three hours.
- The supervisor is normally present in the room, unless you request otherwise (to be indicated to the Chairperson at least 10 days in advance of the *viva*).
- The independent chairperson oversees the examination process through to completion, and submits the examination report (PGR6 form) to Registry.
- There are a range of possible outcomes which are detailed in section 5. The most common outcome is that the award is recommended 'subject to some corrections and/or revisions'.

Post Viva

- What happens post *viva* depends on the outcome of the examination.
- If corrections are required, or if the outcome is unfavourable, the independent chairperson will liaise with you as to what is expected.
- Once the final version of the thesis has been approved, and the PGR6 signed off, you must submit two final, hardbound copies of the thesis to Registry.
- A PGR12 (E-Thesis Declaration Form) must be submitted to Registry and an electronic copy of the thesis must be uploaded to DORAS (doras.dcu.ie).
- A PGR8 (Temporary Restriction of Access) can also be submitted at this stage (this is not compulsory).

Information on the relevant forms, and submission dates can be found at:
www.dcu.ie/registry/postgraduate/submission_dates.shtml

Section 2: Examining a PhD

2.1 What is the Viva?

The *viva voce* (often simply referred to as the *viva*) is a formal oral examination, or oral defence, which forms part of the examination of your thesis. The *viva* panel is made up of an independent chairperson, an internal examiner and at least one external examiner¹. The *viva* will involve a detailed discussion around the content of your thesis and can last anywhere from one to three hours. In some disciplines the student is allowed to make a 20 minute presentation at the beginning, whereas in others the examination commences directly with questioning from the examiners. The *viva* should take place in DCU and is conducted face-to-face².

The examiners will have read your thesis thoroughly before the oral examination. During the examination process the examiners will explore the quality of the written thesis, as well as your ability to articulate and defend your research. While you may feel a level of nervousness as your *viva* approaches, you should remember it is an opportunity for you to engage in scholarly discourse and to disseminate your research to leading academics in your field. As the *viva* is conducted in private there is an element of the unknown for candidates, but being well prepared will help alleviate much of the worry associated with the examination.

2.2 The Criteria for awarding a PhD

The examiners will be assessing your thesis in light of the following criteria, which are laid out in DCU's [Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis](#). You, and your supervisor, should consider these questions prior to submission of your thesis:

- Does your thesis contain original, independent work that is rigorous, weighty and significant?
- Does your thesis represent a significant contribution to knowledge of the subject?
- Does the thesis demonstrate your ability to undertake further research?
- Is your thesis presented in grammatically correct English or Irish or, exceptionally, in another language?
- Is the thesis readable and succinct?
- If the research is part of a collaborative group project, does your thesis clearly indicate your own contribution and the extent of the collaboration?
- During the *viva*, can you demonstrate that the thesis presented is your own work, and that you have an adequate understanding of the research topic and of the broader field of knowledge to which the research belongs? Can you defend your approach and findings?

¹ In the case of a candidate who is/was a member of the staff of the University, it may be a requirement to have the examination conducted by two External Examiners (see section 10.2.3 of the Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis).

² Only where absolutely necessary, consideration may be given to using the University's videoconferencing facilities for the *viva* examination.

Section 3: The *Viva* Panel

3.1 The *Viva* Panel

The *Viva* Panel consists of the internal and external examiners and an independent chairperson. The Chairperson will manage the examination process, in consultation with your supervisor.

Your supervisor may also attend the *viva*, but may not participate in the discussions or intervene in any way. Most candidates find it beneficial to have a supervisor present for moral support, and to take notes, but they are not part of the *viva* panel. Generally a supervisor makes no contribution during the *viva*, and is allowed to provide clarification only if, and when, requested by the examiners or independent chairperson. In most cases the supervisor will leave the room with you while deliberations take place, unless asked by the chairperson to remain. In some cases a candidate may decide not to have their supervisor present. If this is the case for you, you should discuss this with the Chairperson at least ten days before your *viva*.

Each member of the *viva* panel, along with your supervisor and Head of School has a specific role in planning and conducting your *viva* as is detailed in the next section.

3.2 Roles and Responsibilities

Full details of the roles and responsibilities are laid out in the [Academic Roles and Responsibilities in Graduate Research Booklet](#). The main points of interest to you as the candidate are shown here:

Head of School (or nominee)

- Must ensure the University's academic regulations and practices are implemented in respect of your examination.
- Will consult with your supervisor/s and sign off on nominations for internal and external examiners.
- Can mediate in cases of disagreement between a student and supervisor as to the appropriateness of submitting the thesis for examination.

Principal Supervisor/s

- Will consult with the Head of School on the nomination of the examiners.
- Will advise you of the composition of the Board for the *viva voce* examination.
- Will advise you in relevant aspects of the regulations and etiquette, and any protocols specific to your discipline.
- May attend the *viva* with you, unless you request otherwise.
- Will advise you on the corrections and revisions following the *viva*.
- Will upload the electronic copy of the thesis to DORAS (joint responsibility with you).

Examiners

- Will assess the thesis in the light of the criteria published in the DCU Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis.
- Will complete a written report on the outcome of the candidate's oral examination on the day of the *viva voce*.
- Will provide a recommendation and clear grounds for same.
- Will provide a clear and written statement of the changes required in cases where corrections are indicated. These will be provided on the day of the *viva* or shortly after (one week maximum).

- If nominated to do so, will review the corrected thesis to establish that the examiners' recommendations have been met and complete the examination form, normally within 6 weeks of receipt of the corrected thesis.

Independent Chairperson

- Will engage with the examiners, agreeing arrangements for the *viva* and facilitating the exchange of reports beforehand.
- Prior to the *viva voce* examination and in consultation with the examiners, will discuss the order of questions and the overall format of the examination.
- May be consulted, no later than 10 days before the *viva*, should you prefer your supervisor not be present at the examination.
- Will manage the *viva voce* examination. You can expect that he/she will invite you into the room and introduce the examiners.
- In line with discipline norms, will possibly start proceedings by asking you to introduce your research briefly and summarise the main findings.
- Must ensure that you are treated fairly during the examination.
- Will communicate to you, or invite the external examiner to communicate, the outcome of the examination.
- Will ensure the outcome of the *viva* is captured correctly on the PGR6 form.
- Will ensure that the timeframes for corrections and sign off of same are clear to you and to the examiners.
- In cases where an award is recommended subject to corrections, the Chairperson must ensure that a corrected or revised thesis is sent to the appropriate examiner(s) for review and final sign-off, and that the completed form is subsequently returned to the Registry.
- The Independent Chairperson is expected to steer the examination process through to a conclusion. In very exceptional cases where outcome is not straightforward, the Chairperson involvement may extend to engagement with the Head of School, Associate Dean for Research, FABRD, GRSB or Dean of Graduate Studies.

Section 4: Preparation for your Viva

4.1 Pre-viva preparations

Thinking about an impending *viva* can be a nervous time for candidates. Having a plan in place for the weeks prior to the *viva* will help you gain a feeling of control, and ensure you are well prepared for the day. The following is a suggested plan. You should discuss your plan with your supervisor, and alert them to any concerns you have.

Around the time of submitting for examination

- Once your thesis has been submitted remember to stay in close contact with your supervisor and the Chairperson.
- Have a plan of action for the weeks leading up to the *viva* and discuss this with your supervisor.
- Find out who your examiners are, and the date and schedule for your *viva*.
- Have a softbound copy of the thesis printed for yourself, which you can bring into the *viva* with you.
- Speak to your supervisor about organising a mock *viva*. A mock will give you the opportunity to run through the key areas of your thesis, to gauge how well you can handle any difficult questions, and to get feedback on areas you need to work on.
- Research your examiners, in particular, your external examiner/s. Look at their research publications – what is their current interest, what methodology do they follow, how does their research differ from yours? Getting a feel for your examiner's work at this stage will help you view the thesis through their eyes.
- Find out if your School has a policy document on the *viva* process. Speak to your supervisor about protocol and etiquette in the School.
- Go over the questions in the appendix.
- Keep up-to-date with any emerging research in your field, in advance of your *viva*.

4 – 6 Weeks before your viva

- At this stage your focus should return to your thesis.
- Re-read the thesis firstly as a whole, seeing how it reads as a comprehensive piece of work.
- Then re-read chapter by chapter, making notes and highlighting important pages or sections with tabs.
- Start thinking about the questions the examiners may ask and which areas they may focus on. Think about the major strengths of your research, and where weaknesses lie.
- Start compiling a list of possible questions and answers that you can practice. Refer to the appendix in this booklet for some tips on questions.
- Keep a record of any errors or 'typos' as you go through the document. Bring this list with you to the *viva*.
- Re-visit who the key scholars are in your area, and how their work relates to yours. Check if any new research has been published by them since submission.
- At this stage you may find it useful to have a mock *viva*, so if you haven't already done so, speak to your supervisor.
- Practice as much as you can. Prepare answers in a clear, structured way. Make bullet notes for yourself.
- Prepare a presentation or demonstration if they are to form part of the *viva*. Take care not to make these too long - examiners will not appreciate having their time to ask questions cut short.
- Manage expectations of peers, family and friends. There is a range of possible outcomes.

One week before your examination

- Visit the room where the *viva* will take place. Becoming familiar with the location and layout of the room will remove one element of stress on the day.
- Plan for the day of the examination. What time will you get up, how will you get to DCU, what will you wear, will anyone travel with you?
- Make arrangements to meet with your supervisor on the day. The Chairperson should tell you where to wait to be called to the room.
- Don't try and read anything new at this stage, as it may increase stress. Focus on what you already know.
- Write the main points of your thesis on one page. Having a summary sheet at the *viva* will help jog your memory if you get stuck.
- Think about what you want to bring with you – your copy of the thesis, list of errors, summary sheet, some pens, notepad, tissues, water?
- Practice summarising the key components of yours thesis:
 - What are the major strengths?
 - What would you change/where are the limitations?
 - What is the contribution of your work?
 - What are the possible future research areas which could come out of this work?

Section 5:

Viva Day and Post Viva

On the day of the *viva* it is common that most candidates will feel nervous. The following are some tips on how to stay calm and focused on the day itself:

- Give yourself plenty of time to arrive at DCU.
- If you don't want any company beforehand let colleagues/friends know.
- Drink water, and eat something light if you can.
- Try and relax, do whatever works for you to stay calm and focused. Focus on how far you have come, and the strengths of your work.

During the *viva*:

- Remember to breathe, speak slowly and ask for clarification if anything is not clear.
- Do not be alarmed if the examiners' copies of the thesis are full of notes – this is normal, and simply indicates that they have been preparing for the *viva*.
- Use diagrams to explain your points, if that is useful.
- Take notes if this helps, or ask your supervisor to take notes for you.
- Refer to your copy of the thesis and summary sheet if this helps.

Normal practice is that the candidate, along with their supervisor, is called to the room once the panel have had an initial discussion, and have agreed the direction of questioning for the *viva*. You are permitted to ask for a break, if needed, during the *viva*.

At the end of the questioning you and your supervisor will be asked to leave the room, and wait in a location nearby, while the panel deliberates.

Once a decision has been made you will be called back to the room. At this stage either the Chairperson or external examiner will announce the outcome and you should be given some feedback.

5.1 Handling Questions

It is normal to feel nervous going into your *viva*, but remember this is your opportunity to showcase your work with experts in your field. Different examiners have different styles, and most will look for the weaknesses as well as the strengths in your thesis. Be prepared for this and avoid sounding defensive or laying blame for mistakes elsewhere.

- Ask for clarity if the question is unclear.
- Pause before speaking, take a moment to think about the question before answering, and answer in a structured and concise way.
- Admit it if you can't answer a question.
- Don't be afraid to refer to your notes when answering questions.
- Be prepared to answer questions in the context of other work in your discipline.
- Ask for a break if you need it.
- Don't take criticisms personally. This is an academic discussion around your work, and there will inevitably be differing views.
- Use the *viva* to showcase what you know.

5.2 Possible Outcomes

The examiners can make a variety of recommendations, which are clearly outlined in the PGR6 (examination report form). Recommendation two (detailed below) is the most common. If you are unclear of the outcome of your *viva* you should speak with the Independent Chairperson who is responsible for overseeing the examination process.

Recommendations:

1. The award is recommended with no corrections required. (This outcome is rare but not unknown)

- The [PGR6](#) is signed off and submitted to Registry by the Independent Chairperson.
- You can arrange to print and bind the two hardbound copies of your thesis and submit them to Registry.
- A PGR12 (E-Thesis Declaration) must accompany the thesis.
- A PGR8 (Temporary Restriction of Access) may also be submitted at this stage (this is not compulsory).
- A PDF of your thesis must be uploaded to [DORAS](#) (DCU's online repository).

2. The award is recommended subject to corrections and revisions.

- The corrections and/or revisions should be clearly detailed in the examiners' report and will be given to you either on the day, or shortly after the *viva* (one week maximum).
- If you don't receive details of the corrections speak to the Independent Chairperson or your supervisor.
- Depending on what was agreed, these corrections may be validated by the internal or external examiner, or both.
- Corrections must be sent to the examiners via the Independent Chairperson.
- Corrections must be signed off as having been completed before you can submit your hardbound copies to Registry.
- If you have any queries you should direct these to your supervisor or the Chairperson. You should not contact examiners directly.

3. The award is not recommended but a resubmission is allowed.

- In this case a second *viva* may be required.
- The same examiners will examine the thesis, unless exceptional circumstances relating to their availability pertain.
- You will need to work closely with your supervisor should this be the outcome.
- You will be given 12 months from the date of the *viva* in which to resubmit and there may be fee liabilities.

4. Other recommendations are less common, and include a recommendation that you withdraw and resubmit for a higher award, or a rejection in which no award is recommended.

5.3 Appeals Process

A student can submit an appeal in respect of the decision regarding their examination. The appeal may not be based on disagreement with the academic judgement of the examiners or supervisory panel. For full details of the grounds for appeal and the procedures to be followed please refer to section 13 of the Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis.

5.4 Post *Viva* work

- Most successful candidates will have some corrections to complete post *viva*.
- Make sure you are clear as to what is expected of you in terms of corrections.
- You should receive a report from the examiners outlining corrections to be done. Discuss this with your supervisor and/or the Chairperson if anything is unclear.
- The level of work required, if any, should be clear from the examiners' report. If clarity is needed, ask.
- Give yourself time to relax post *viva*, but do not leave it too long to work on any corrections. The longer you wait the harder it is to regain focus to complete the final pieces.
- Following approval by the examiners you must submit two hardbound copies of the thesis to Registry.
- Two forms must accompany the thesis. A [PGR7](#) or [PGR8](#) form which either allows or restricts access to your thesis, and a [PGR12](#) form which is the e-thesis declaration form.
- A PDF of your thesis must be uploaded to [DORAS](#) (DCU's online repository).

Section 6: Supports

Most candidates will feel some level of apprehension as their *viva* approaches. Detailed preparation helps with this. As well as following this guide you may find it useful to consult other resources.

- Rowena Murray, *How to Survive a Viva, Defending a thesis in an oral examination* [Book], available in DCU library:
<http://capitadiscovery.co.uk/dcu/items/622504?query=viva&resultsUri=items%3Fquery%3Dviva>
- The Guardian, *How to Survive a Viva: Top 17 Tips*: www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2015/jan/08/how-to-survive-a-phd-viva-17-top-tips

You may also be starting to plan for life after the *viva*. The following page on the Vitae website gives some good advice and resources on planning your next career move.

- Vitae, Completing your Doctorate:
www.vitae.ac.uk/doing-research/doing-a-doctorate/completing-your-doctorate

A small level of anxiety is good, as it may help you perform on the day. If, however, you feel things are getting out of control seek support and help. You should remain in close contact with your supervisor during this time, and discuss any fears or worries with them. You can also talk to the Independent Chairperson, a colleague in your School, Faculty or Research Centre. Let family and friends know how you are feeling, and what they can do to support you during this time. On campus, Student Support & Development offer a [counselling service](#). Their site has some useful leaflets on handling stress. If you feel you need more support, you can also arrange an appointment with one of the counsellors in DCU.

- DCU Counselling Service: www.dcu.ie/students/counselling/index.shtml
- DCU Counselling Service, Stress Management advice:
www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/students_counselling/pdfs/stress-management.pdf
- DCU, Academic Role and Responsibilities in Graduate Research:
www.dcu.ie/sites/default/files/graduate_research/Academic%20Roles%20and%20Responsibilities%20in%20Graduate%20Research_v1_2013_web.pdf

Appendix 1: Sample Viva Questions

When thinking about the possible lines of questioning turn your attention back to your thesis. After you have re-read each chapter and taken notes, start thinking of possible questions. Rehearse your answers, and focus on the areas you want to highlight, as well as any weaknesses in your thesis. Some samples of the types of questions that may arise are listed in this section. Depending on your topic and discipline there are many other possibilities, and this is where your own expertise will come into play. Remember this is your time to show you are becoming an expert in your field.

The following list of questions has been adopted from a variety of sources (listed below), and includes input from faculty in DCU:

- NUIG, *PhD Viva Guide, A Springboard for your PhD viva preparation*: www.nuigalway.ie/media/graduatestudies/files/phdvivaguide/phd_viva_guide.pdf
- Twigg (1997), *Preparing for the PhD viva voice – A Personal Reflection*: www.robertfeldt.net/advice/twigg_preparing_for_phd_viva.pdf;
- University of Leister, *Practice Viva Questions*: <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/gradschool/training/eresources/study-guides/viva/prepare/questions>
- Trafford, V. (2003) Questions in doctoral vivas: views from the inside, *Quality Assurance in Education*, 11(2) pp. 114 – 122
- Remenyi et al. (2003) The Doctoral Viva: A Great Educational Experience or a Gun Fight at the OK Corral? *Irish Journal of Management*, 24(2), pp. 105 – 116
- Murray, R. (2009) *How to Survive a Viva, Defending a thesis in an oral examination*, Open University Press, UK

Note: While the following list of questions are quite general, you may be asked very specific questions relating to your own study, your understanding of it and your choices.

Introduction Questions

Note: You should prepare and rehearse a three minutes summary of your thesis, which will help answer the initial questions. Think about what you did, why you choose this area, why you choose your approach, what did you find and what are the implications. Initial questions are often used to ease the candidate into the *viva*, and to give them time to warm up in advance of the more specific, details questions. That is not to say these questions are any less important, and you should be well rehearsed in them.

Some Sample Questions:

Tell us about your thesis, and why you are interested in this area?

What is original/important about your research?

Why did you focus on this particular area or problem?

What is the strongest aspect of your research? What are your major contributions?

What are the questions underpinning your research?

Looking back, what would you do differently/what would you change?

What have you found the most interesting aspect of your research?

What led you to choose this topic?

How did you know that it had not been studied previously?

Did your knowledge of the area allow you to anticipate your results?

Contextual/Literature Questions

Some Sample Questions:

You refer to XXX as a key influencer in your research - can you summarise the particular relevance of their work?

What are the main issues in this area, and how did your thesis address these?

What developments have there been in this field since you began your doctorate?

How have these changed the research context in which you are working?

How is your thesis placed in terms of the existing theory?

You do not say much about the XXX theory in your thesis - can you explain why you have not focused more on that?

What theories inform your work? Why did you choose this theoretical framework?

Did you consider any other theoretical approach?

Who are the main contributors in this field?

What did you learn from your review of the literature?

Which studies most closely match yours? Where does yours differ?

How does your work relate to the work of XXX?

Have you heard about XXX theory, and how could you have used it?

What is the current state of the art in XXX?

Methodological Questions

Note: The examiners will be looking at why you choose a particular methodology, and your knowledge of other possible methodologies. Prepare a justification for your choice. They will expect you to be able to discuss reliability, validity and how generalisable your findings are. Make sure you can show a philosophical understanding of your approach.

Some Sample Questions:

How does the methodology and method enable you to ask and consider the questions and deal with ideas?

Why did you choose this particular method?

What would you have gained by taking a different approach? What alternatives did you consider?

What are the limitations of your method?

How generalisable are your findings? Would you have different results had you had conducted your study in a different context?

Talk us through the main features of your sample. Are you satisfied with the sample achieved?

What specifically was your relationship to the context and subject of the study? Do you think your relationship impacted on your study?

How well did the study design work in practice? Where there any issues in the data collection process?

How did you establish the limits around the scope of your data collection?

How did you decide on the variables to include in the conceptual framework?

Analysis and Finding

Some Sample Questions:

How do your findings fit with existing literature?

What do you think this study has shown? Can you describe your main findings in a few sentences?

Why did you choose the method of analysis? What were the alternatives?

Did you encounter any problems with applying the method of analysis?

Implications, Reflections, Conclusions

Note: Be familiar with the contribution to knowledge, possibility for future development, uniqueness of your research, replication, limitations and further opportunities for dissemination.

Some Sample Questions:

What relevance does this work have for future research in the area?

Can you clarify how your conclusions are supported by your findings?

Were there any surprises or disappointments in conducting this research?

If you were to start over, what would you do differently?

How do you relate your research to other findings in the field?

What do you see as the next steps in this research?

You said in your thesis that XXX - can you expand on that point?

In what way do you consider your thesis to be original?

What are the empirical, practice, and theoretical implications of your findings?

What have you done that merits a PhD?

Can you summarise your key findings?

What are the contributions of your thesis?

To whom, and in what context is this knowledge valuable?

What are the implications of your findings to theory/practice?

Will you publish your work?

Discuss how the recommendations follow from your findings.

How feasible do you think your recommendations for future work are?

Why have you picked [these] as the priority for future work?

Appendix 2: **Thesis Formatting**

As you write up your thesis you should refer to section 9 of the Academic Regulations for Postgraduate Degrees by Research and Thesis for information on thesis formats and guidance on thesis design and layout.

A thesis format exemplar, which was prepared by Registry, can be found on the GSO loop page: <https://loop.dcu.ie/course/view.php?id=10875>

Different Schools and disciplines have preferences regarding referencing styles so you should speak to your supervisor for guidance on this.

DCU Library have put together a detailed guide on the Harvard style of citing and referencing which can be viewed here: <https://www101.dcu.ie/library/Citing&ReferencingGuide/player.html>

Graduate Studies Office

Dublin City University,
Glasnevin,
Dublin 9

E: graduatestudiesoffice@dcu.ie

W: www.dcu.ie/graduatestudies

P: +353 1 700 5498 / 6285