

# Conducting a *viva voce* as a videoconference: Guidance

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 *Viva voce* examinations may be held in-person or via videoconference.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.2 Videoconferencing or other suitable technologically-based communication arrangements can be made for the conduct of the *viva voce*, provided all parties taking part agree to these arrangements and all necessary safeguards are in place to facilitate the smooth running of the examination.

## 2. Conditions

- 2.1 Research students who would prefer their *viva voce* to be conducted as a videoconference should discuss this with their co-ordinating supervisor at the earliest opportunity. The discussion should ideally take place prior to the student submitting their thesis, to enable the co-ordinating supervisor to discuss this with the nominated examiners. The student should also formally log their request in writing (e.g. via email) with the Faculty Graduate School Office.
- 2.2 The co-ordinating supervisor must obtain written agreement for the *viva voce* to be conducted as a videoconference from all parties due to be present; and, in advance of the *viva voce*, must submit copies to the Faculty Graduate School Office for retention with the student's formal request (see paragraph 2.1 above) on their record.
- 2.3 All parties should be fully aware of the date and time of the *viva voce*. This is especially important when participants may be in different time zones.
- 2.4 The *viva voce* must not be recorded unless there is a requirement to do so as a reasonable adjustment for accessibility for the research student. In such cases, the examiners should be informed of any measures or adjustments necessary for the conduct of the examination in advance of the *viva voce* commencing.
- 2.5 There is no special requirement beyond that specified in the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#) for a *viva voce* that is conducted as a videoconference to have an independent Chair,

## 3. Preparation for the *viva voce*

- 3.1 The student's co-ordinating supervisor has responsibility for organising the *viva voce*. If there has been agreement to conduct the *viva voce* as a videoconference, they are also responsible for ensuring that all parties have access to the necessary technology to conduct the *viva voce* through this medium. An internet connection as well as webcam and microphone is essential.
- 3.2 A decision on the software system to be used should be made sufficiently far in advance of the date of the *viva voce* to ensure that all parties have downloaded the relevant software and to become familiar with its use.
- 3.3 The chosen software system should be institutionally supported and selected with due regard for security, data protection and privacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and until 31<sup>st</sup> January 2022, the University's default position is that the *viva voce* should take place online.

- 3.4 It is advised that all equipment and software to be used during the *viva voce* is tested in advance of the proposed date and that at least one party who will be present on the day is sufficiently experienced in its use to be able to assist with any minor technical issues that occur during the examination.
- 3.5 A contingency plan, in the event of technical failure, must be agreed by all parties in advance of the *viva voce*. In the event of a technical failure that cannot be resolved, it is not permissible for the *viva voce* to be conducted via telephone (also see paragraphs 4.7 and 4.13 below).
- 3.6 Each party must advise the co-ordinating supervisor of their contact telephone number which is to be used in the event of an internet failure. The co-ordinating supervisor will ensure that this information is passed to the Chair immediately prior to the commencement of the *viva voce*. When sharing telephone numbers, all parties should be advised that these details should only be used to discuss the next steps in the event of an internet failure, and must not be retained without permission beyond the completion of the *viva voce*.
- 3.7 Any additional visual aids not included in the thesis submission but which the student wishes to use in the *viva voce*, should be submitted to the co-ordinating supervisor not later than three working days in advance of the date of the *viva voce*. The co-ordinating supervisor is responsible for ensuring their prompt circulation to the examiners and should advise the examiners that any such materials do not normally form part of their judgement of the thesis.
- 3.8 Wherever possible, a technical rehearsal should be conducted between the student and their co-ordinating supervisor to ensure that the student is comfortable with the medium and to establish that the student is confident to proceed with the *viva voce* by videoconference.

## 4. The examination

- 4.1 The following guidance should be read in conjunction with the *Guidance for Examiners of Postgraduate Research Awards* which can be found in the Useful Downloads section of the Quality Handbook [here](#).

### *General tips and advice*

- 4.2 A research degree *viva voce* is a significant milestone and offers the opportunity to acknowledge all the work that has gone into the student's thesis. Conducting the examination as a videoconference can feel impersonal and runs the risk of this moment feeling anti-climactic for the student. To try to mitigate this, the examiners should celebrate successes clearly and enthusiastically.
- 4.3 The *viva voce* is likely to be stressful for the student and using the medium of videoconferencing can make this more so. All parties should be aware of this and approach the *viva voce* supportively and with understanding.
- 4.4 All parties should note that the use of videoconferencing can increase the likelihood of people speaking over one another, parties mishearing each other and there being technical issues. This is normal and should be acknowledged.

### *Prior to the viva voce*

- 4.5 All parties should allow themselves adequate time to set up the videoconferencing software and should find a quiet space in which to conduct the *viva voce* where they will not be disturbed or interrupted.
- 4.6 Prior to the formal start time, a test call between the student and examiners should be made to check the videoconferencing software is working and the internet speed is sufficient. This test should be conducted sufficiently far in advance to allow for any modifications to be made to the set-up before the *viva voce* commences.
- 4.7 If, during the check of the videoconferencing software, it is found to be technically unsuitable, the examiners can recommend that the *viva voce* does not proceed and is rescheduled.

### *During the viva voce*

- 4.8 The content and conduct of the examination should take the same format as for an in-person *viva voce*.
- 4.9 The student's identity must be verified at the start of the *viva voce* by a member of University staff, usually the internal examiner.
- 4.10 All parties should aim to be visible throughout the examination and should have their cameras on. However, it is permissible to temporarily suspend visual contact and continue the *viva voce* using the videoconferencing software's audio connection should technical issues warrant this.
- 4.11 To minimise disruption to the *viva voce* in the event of a technical failure, the examiners should be encouraged to focus on substantive issues with the student's thesis first, with minor issues being dealt with secondarily.
- 4.12 Should technological issues occur during the *viva voce*, any party may request that the *viva voce* is paused in order that the issues can be resolved.
- 4.13 Should it not be possible to re-establish the connection promptly and a decision taken by the Chair that the *viva voce* should be halted, the examiners must determine how much of the examination had been completed at the point the connection was lost and what content must be addressed when it is possible to reschedule the *viva voce*.
- 4.14 Should technical issues only occur towards the end of the *viva voce* and the examiners jointly agree that they have obtained sufficient information to make their recommendation, they can advise the Chair that, in their view, it is not necessary to reschedule the *viva voce* and the examination can be concluded. Within the *examiners' joint report and recommendation form*, the examiners should specify the technical failure, time at which the *viva voce* was concluded and explicit reference should be made to any content that was not discussed prior to the technical failure.

*After the viva voce*

- 4.15 At the conclusion of an in-person *viva voce*, the examiners will usually ask the student to step out of the room while they consider their recommendation. When a *viva voce* is conducted as a videoconference, the examiners should ask the student to leave the meeting so that they can consider their recommendation in private. The examiners should then reconvene with the student at a mutually convenient time to discuss their agreed recommendations.
- 4.16 When completing their report, the Chair should specifically address the online nature of the *viva voce*. Their report should note if the examination was paused at any time and if there were any factors that impacted the *viva voce*, e.g. slow internet connection or poor audio or visual connection.

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