

University of Nottingham

Supplementary Regulations on Viva Voce Examination Guidance for Research Degrees during the COVID 19 Outbreak

The University recognises that doctoral viva voce examinations may be disrupted during this time of possible altered working, and reduced ability to travel due to COVID 19. For viva voce examinations that are imminent, the University is supportive of short-term postponements in order to give time for appropriate alternative arrangements to be made in line with this guidance.

For viva voce examinations that are imminent, the internal examiners should contact all parties as soon as possible to discuss the arrangements in order to determine whether participants are willing and able to travel safely and are happy to participate in a face-to-face viva. Local travel may be possible, but as external examiner travel to Nottingham for a viva voce examination may not be considered essential, alternative arrangements using video/online technologies should be discussed. All parties should be involved in and agree whether the viva should run at original time because suitable arrangements can be put in place in the time available; be postponed briefly to enable organisational and logistical adjustments, or postponed to a later date.

In the event that one or multiple parties are not able to attend the viva examination in person and there is a need to conduct it using video/online methods this guidance should be followed.

1. As part of the arrangements for conducting a viva using alternative video/online arrangements:

- a. All parties (candidate, external examiner, internal examiner) must confirm that they agree to the viva/oral examination being conducted remotely using video/online methods and that those who are to participate in this manner have suitable equipment (with both audio and video) and a private location available, which can be free of distractions.
- b. The candidate must be aware that if they agree to proceed with the being viva being conducted using video/online methods, the method/format cannot be used as grounds for a later appeal.
- c. No recordings of the examination must take place by any party; no evidence based on recordings of the viva will be permissible in any appeal process.
- d. An Independent Chair must be appointed. This person will chair the viva but not take a role in the decision making. The responsibilities of the Independent Chair for a viva being conducted by video/online are detailed below.
- e. If the University is still open and it is feasible to do so, the candidate should be co-located with either the internal examiner or Independent Chair so long as doing so does not put any party at increased risk of Coronavirus and this does not put pressure on any party to disclose issues that increase their risk.
- f. If the candidate is located remotely they can nominate and have a supporter/observer present with them either for the entire viva, or for the communication of the decision. This individual is not allowed to contribute in any way to the conduct of the viva, and must be introduced at the start.
- g. The viva should be scheduled at a time that is reasonable to the time zone in which the candidate is located.

2. Technological considerations

- a. It is recommended that the viva be conducted using Microsoft Teams or Skype, however consideration can be given to other applications especially if the participants are more familiar with these. If there is no agreement on a common platform/application that can be used, the viva should be postponed.
- b. The technology must support video and audio connections and as part of agreeing to conduct the viva remotely the parties must confirm that they have a relevant equipment and that it is plugged in to maintain battery life.
- c. The video must commence using both video and audio, however video does not need to be maintained by all parties throughout. For example the Chair may not require video throughout and it should be noted that maintaining active video engagement may be difficult, if there is also a need simultaneously consult an online version of the thesis.
- d. If there is a failure in the connection/technology attempts should be made to re-connect. In the event of a serious or protracted breakdown in the connection or quality of the connection of more than 20 minutes the viva should be halted. However, if it is clear before 20 minutes are up that re-connection cannot be made or is unlikely the viva should be halted.
- e. The decision as to whether to halt a viva should be made by the Independent Chair. How to make the decision as to whether the viva is postponed, re-convened or concluded is covered in section 4.

3. Before the viva

- a. The external and internal examiners' separate pre-viva reports **must** have been submitted in advance of the viva and shared with the Chair.
- b. Any presentation that the candidate is expected to make as part of the viva must be sent in advance to the Independent Chair who is responsible for sharing it with the examiners. The purpose of this is to facilitate all parties having the presentation ready to view during the viva, rather than to assess it in advance.

4. During the viva

- a. The purpose of the viva and its conduct should remain as per the standard guidance in the Quality Manual:

*The viva will normally include **questions** designed to ascertain that the thesis embodies the candidate's own research. It will test the candidate's general comprehension of the field of study within which the subject of the thesis falls. It will test the candidate's acquaintance with the general literature of the subject, knowledge of the relation of the work to the wider field of which it is a part, and the respects in which the work advances, modifies, or otherwise affects this wider field of scholarship.*

- b. If the viva has to be halted due to a breakdown in the connection or quality of the connection, the Independent Chair should consult with the examiners via an alternative method (e.g. telephone). The examiners should decide whether there is a need to re-convene at another date or whether sufficient discussion had taken place by the point of the communication loss that further examination would not change their decision. In arriving at such a decision, the examiners should take into account the requirements and outcomes of

a doctoral degree and not the extent to which they had covered the contents of the thesis. If it is agreed that the viva needs to be re-scheduled this should be at a mutually agreed time for all parties. The Independent Chair should communicate the outcome of this decision to the candidate as soon as possible.

5. External and Internal examiner discussion

- a. In order that the examiners can discuss the candidate's performance, the candidate must leave the video/conference call and the Independent Chair must confirm that this has happened. The candidate should be advised how they will be contacted to invite them back into the video/online meeting and given an approximate time when this will happen.
- b. It is recommended that the examiners and Independent Chair consider whether a separate video/conference call meeting would be preferable to continuing in the one in which the viva has taken place.
- c. The Independent Chair must be party to the post viva discussion to ensure that any decisions are based solely on the candidate's performance and do not reflect issues related to the format of the viva.

6. Communication of the decision

- a. The candidate should be contacted and invited to re-join the video/online meeting. They may be accompanied by a supporter/observer.
- b. Candidates should be informed of the outcome of their examination as soon as possible. The possible outcomes and procedures to be followed are the same as for a standard viva.
- c. The communication of outcomes should be sensitive to the fact that the doctoral examination is the most significant culmination of the candidate's work and that the normal support and activities surrounding this rite of passage are likely to be disrupted when the candidate is in a different location to the examiners.

The responsibilities of the Independent Chair are to:

- Preside over the viva proceedings in order to ensure consistency between different vivas and particularly to ensure consistency in the conduct of vivas conducted using video/online format as compared to those conducted under normal circumstances.
- Ensure that any post viva decisions and comments are based solely on the candidate's performance and do not reflect issues related to the video/online format of the viva.
- Provide an additional viewpoint if the conduct of the viva should become the subject of a student appeal.
- Confirm that all parties are comfortable with the arrangements and that the candidates and the examiners can see and hear each other clearly.
- Make clear the expectations indicating the likely duration, the ability of the candidate and examiners to request brief breaks if necessary, and ensuring that all parties have everything to hand that they require.
- Actively monitor the quality of the connection, and in the case of occasional breakdowns/pauses in either the video or the audio link ensure that any discussion is repeated and that no misunderstanding has occurred.
- Make the decision about whether the viva continues in the event of a serious or protracted breakdown in the connection of more than 20 minutes. However, if it is clear before 20 minutes are up that re-connection cannot be made the viva should be postponed.

- Make notes of what was covered during the viva and if the candidate experienced difficulties in responding whether this was due to their understanding or due to the technology/format being used.

In addition, the Chair should:

- Verify the candidate's identity, if this cannot be done by the Internal Examiner.
- Circulate any presentation that the candidate is required to present to the examiners ahead of the viva commencing.
- Offer a test call with all parties separately ahead of the viva.
- Collect and hold telephone numbers of all parties for effective communication in case the viva has to be halted due to technical difficulties.
- Confirm that all parties are in a suitable location and won't be disturbed
- Put all parties at ease, particularly in light of the nature of the situation and the format of the viva.
- Ensure that the duration of the viva is not excessive, especially in light of the format
- Ensure that the candidate has appropriate follow up after the viva.