



## Guidance for Research Degree Oral Examinations

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### Introduction

Due to ongoing movement restrictions and social distancing due to Covid-19, oral examinations (viva voce) for a research degree will typically be conducted in a remote manner by multi-way video link, with the candidate and all panel members in separate locations. Hybrid models are also possible depending on the current official guidelines in place in the appropriate geographical location. In rare cases, students may request to postpone their viva until such time that a face to face viva can take place at Keele University with all members of the examination panel present in the room with the candidate. The type of viva requested will be selected on the form nominating title, examiners and chair, with the understanding that any in-person or on-campus arrangements may have to be amended if guidelines change.

The following guidance for arranging and conducting the viva should be adopted. This guidance should be read in conjunction with the University's Regulations and the [Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Degrees](#). For guidance on the technology and structure of the multi-way video link, please see [Video Viva Guidance for Chairs](#).

### 1. Preparation for an Oral Examination by Video Link

- 1.1 Prior to consenting to the oral examination being conducted by video link, all parties should be made aware of the benefits and difficulties of the technology for this purpose and should consent to undertaking the viva by video link. No pressure should be placed on any participant to acquiesce to the request for the oral examination to be conducted by video link. Viva by audio link or call only are not acceptable.
- 1.2 Arrangements should be made to conduct a trial-run at least one day before the day of the oral examination and repeated on the day, shortly before the scheduled time for the oral examination to ensure that all participants can log into the viva. When scheduling a time for the oral examination, consideration should be given to the start time of the viva in light of the time-zones if when one of the participants is overseas.
- 1.3 Arrangements should be made to allow the examination panel to speak to each other collectively with absolute privacy, in the absence of the student, before and after the oral examination to agree the viva agenda and the content of the Post-Viva Examiners' Joint Report and the recommendations to be conveyed to the student. However, examiners must not be in contact with each other until each has submitted their own Pre-Viva Examiner's Report.

- 1.4 Arrangements for the oral examination by video link should normally be coordinated by the PGR Administrator within the student's Faculty Research Office, in consultation with the PGR Director or nominated deputy.
- 1.5 It is the responsibility of the student to notify the Chair of any adjustments to the way in which the viva will be conducted due to a disability before submission of the Viva by Video Link Request Form.
- 1.6 Advice and interpretation of this Guidance may also be sought from the Secretary to Research Degrees Committee.

## **2. Attendance at the Oral Examination by Video Link**

- 2.1 Attendance:     Student  
                          Independent Chair  
                          External Examiner  
                          Internal Examiner or Second External Examiner  
                          [Supervisor – see 3.4, below]
- 2.2 The Independent Chair will manage the conduct of the oral examination and should have attended training and/or be experienced in conducting an oral examination by video link. Training resources can be found [here](#). The Independent Chair is responsible for taking all reasonable steps to ensure that the student is not disadvantaged in any way compared to the normal situation of a face-to-face oral examination.
- 2.3 The internal examiner, the external examiner(s) and the student will all have provided written agreement, in advance, for the oral examination to be conducted by a remote video link and should have read and understood this Guidance.
- 2.4 For identification purposes, the PGR Office in Quality Assurance will email the Chair the picture from the student's University record (the same photograph submitted on the student's Keele Card). The Independent Chair will be responsible for formally identifying the student at the beginning of the oral examination.
- 2.5 The PGR Director (or nominated deputy) has the right to observe the oral examination when conducted by video link, subject to all parties being informed of their attendance in advance of the oral examination.

## **3. During the Oral Examination**

- 3.1 The student should visually confirm to the panel that no other persons are present in the room for the oral examination and that there is no indication of foul play, such as the student being assisted in any way in their responses to the panel. It is expected in these circumstances that normally the candidate's hands would be in full view of the camera throughout the examination
- 3.2 The Chair should confirm with all members that the location is sufficiently private and free of any interruptions or distractions for the student or the panel.
- 3.3 Any materials brought into the examination room by the student should be identified to all participants at the start of the examination.

- 3.4 The Independent Chair should confirm formally that the environment for all participants is sufficient to conduct an oral examination, e.g. lighting, positioning of the cameras, seating layout, adequate personal space, sound volume and quality etc. and ask for any adjustment if necessary.
- 3.5 In all other aspects, the oral examination by video link should follow the same procedures for a face-to-face examination.

#### **4. Video Link Technology and Failure**

- 4.1 The technology used should be Microsoft Teams. The University will not permit the oral examination to be conducted by telephone conference.
- 4.2 Skype (or an equivalent and appropriate technology) should only be used as a back-up means of video link if the preferred video conferencing system experiences a failure. All parties should test their Skype (or equivalent technology) connection at the time when the video conferencing system is being tested, as a contingency plan.
- 4.3 All parties must have access to the appropriate technology, and a means of contacting an IT operative for assistance with technical issues. All parties must be comfortable with the use of the video link technology for the purposes of the oral examination.
- 4.4 Thorough testing of the video link connection should be undertaken before the time of the oral examination and if there are any doubts about the quality or sustainability of the connection, the examination should not be allowed to proceed.
- 4.5 The oral examination should not normally be recorded by any of the participants.
- 4.6 If the connection deteriorates during the call so that the panel cannot adequately communicate amongst themselves and with the student, or if the video call breaks up or is disconnected, it is recommended that at least two attempts are made to reconnect the call to achieve a good quality connection.
- 4.7 If this is not possible, all parties must accept that in the event of repeated technology failures that prevent completion of the oral examination, it will be necessary for the viva to be re-scheduled or to be deferred until a face to face viva is possible.

#### **5. After the Oral Examination**

- 5.1 All participants should formally confirm at the conclusion of the oral examination that the use of video link had no substantive bearing on the examination process. This should also be recorded in the joint Part 2 report of the examiners.
- 5.2 The Post-Viva Examiners' Joint Report Form and Report should be completed in the same manner as a face-to-face viva, though reference should be made that the viva took place through a multi-way video link.
- 5.3 The research cost centre will be responsible for any costs which are incurred for the oral examination to take place by video link. The external examiner's fee at the normal rate will continue to be met from central funds (Directorate of Student and Academic Services).
- 5.4 Student appeals will be considered in accordance with University Regulations. However, once a student has provided written consent to be examined by video link, appeals against

an adverse result on the grounds associated with their ability to operate the system would not normally be accepted.

