



Oral Examination Procedures

All research students, whether doctoral or masters students, will be required to take part in an oral examination (also known as 'viva' or 'viva voce'). This document sets out the procedures for the conduct of the oral examination and suggests ways in which participants should prepare for it.

Aims and Objectives of the Oral Examination

- 1 The oral examination is an integral part of the examination process, and so its aim is **to evaluate whether the student has met the standards for the award.**
- 2 Within the examination process, the oral examination has the following objectives:
 - to confirm or revise the examiner's initial views about the standard of the student's research, based on the thesis;
 - to identify and discuss any amendments to the thesis which may be required to meet the standard for the award;
 - to determine as far as possible whether the Academic Honesty Declaration Form made by the student on submission of the thesis is true.
- 3 These objectives will be achieved through the examiners discussing the research and the thesis with the student, to gain clarification, probe background knowledge, and assure themselves of the student's full understanding of the relevant issues. In particular the examiners may wish to elicit information on the following issues:
 - explanation of the structure of the thesis;
 - justification for the inclusion or exclusion of material;
 - explanation for and justification of the use of particular research methods and techniques;
 - defence of the originality of the thesis, and how it relates to the work of others
 - clarification of any points of ambiguity within the thesis;
 - justification for the conceptual approach taken in the thesis;
 - the depth of knowledge of the contextual background to the subject of the thesis.
- 4 While it is recognised that apparently minor errors may conceal more fundamental problems, in general the purpose of the oral examination is not to identify and question the candidate on minor errors or amendments. Examiners should normally present to the student a list of such amendments required at the end of the examination, and incorporate them into the Post-Viva Examiners' Joint Report.
- 5 The final recommendation will be made on the basis of the total examination process with the examiners having formed a view about whether the student has achieved the standards required for the award. If amendments to the thesis are required to reflect their judgement about the student's achievements, this should be reflected in the recommendation made, and guidance about revisions given in the Post-Viva Report.

- 6 **Note:** Where research programmes approved by Senate incorporate a taught or professional element students may, in addition, be required to complete and pass an approved course of study and assessment, before the final award can be made.

Preparing for the Oral Examination – Examiners

- 7 **Organisation of oral examination:** The arrangements for the oral examination will be made through the Research Institutes. The organiser of the viva, who is normally the internal examiner or the Independent Chair, must ensure that all parties (both examiners, Independent Chair and student) are included in the process and are involved in the decision relating to the date, time and place of the viva. The organiser must then inform both the Quality Assurance Officer (with responsibility for PGR activities) and the Faculty Research Office/Research Institute PGR Director of the agreed date, time and location of the viva. If any additional facilities are needed for the examination these must be identified by the examiners in advance and organised through the Research Institute.
- 8 **Planning the examination:** The Independent Chair should arrange to meet (or otherwise communicate with) the examiners, prior to the oral examination, to discuss how they will conduct the examination. In particular they will consider which key issues they wish to address and how they will organise the discussion.
- 9 **Notice of additional requirements:** In the majority of subject disciplines the examination will normally take the form of oral discussion only. In cases where the examiners wish to request a presentation or demonstration by the candidate the examiners must notify the Independent Chair of their requirements and the student must be notified by the Independent Chair of such a request at least two weeks in advance of the oral examination, together with a statement about the intended purpose.

Preparing for the Oral Examination – Students

- 10 It is desirable that students remain engaged with their research material during the months prior to the oral examination by, for example, re-reading their written submission, giving talks on their research, or preparing material for publication, as appropriate. Students should also continue reading new relevant material as it is published.
- 11 Students should ensure that they know their thesis thoroughly, and have a clear understanding of, and can articulate briefly, the key points which are important and new in the research. They should be able to respond to questions which address the issues listed above under 3.
- 12 Students should ensure that they have read and understood this guidance on the examination process.
- 13 Students should preferably have undertaken some form of training or practice in the oral examination, such as the session provided in the University's Research Training programme, and a mock viva.
- 14 Students must not communicate directly with the examiners about the thesis or its assessment.

Conduct of the Oral Examination

- 15 The oral examination of the student will be carried out by both (or all) examiners, with the Independent Chair governing the conduct of the examination. The normal expectation is that no other persons will be present. However, if all parties agree, Supervisors may be present as observers, and may answer questions directly addressed to them by the examiners in terms of background and contextual information. Where Supervisors are not present it is expected they will be available for consultation if the examiners wish.
- 16 It is the role of the Independent Chair to ensure that the appropriate tone and environment are created and maintained. The oral examination should be conducted in a non-intimidating way, reassuring the students, putting them at their ease, and minimising the inevitable stress of the occasion. Students should be treated with respect, courtesy, and understanding.
- 17 The Independent Chair should ensure, at the outset, that the student understands the purpose of the oral examination, introduce the examiners, and outline for the student the way the examination will be conducted. In addition, the Independent Chair should inform the student that no information about outcomes will be provided until the end of the examination, and that no conclusions should be drawn about this. The Independent Chair should refer to this guidance as being the document which governs the conduct of the oral examination.
- 18 The oral examination will be in the form of discussion, question and answer. Unless notified in advance (see 9 above) the examiners may not request any other activity such as a presentation or demonstration. The Independent Chair should ensure that questioning is not excessively protracted and keeps to the key purpose of the oral examination.
- 19 An oral examination will normally last for at least one hour, and rarely more than two hours. If it is necessary for the examination to last for more than two hours, the student will be offered a break.
- 20 At the end of the oral examination, the Independent Chair will ask the student to leave the room while the examiners reach a definitive conclusion about the outcome of the examination process. The decision should be reached as quickly as possible to minimise unnecessary stress.

The Independent Chair of the oral examination has the responsibility for the conduct of the oral examination at Keele. Full guidance is available at <http://www.keele.ac.uk/research/currentpgrstudents/pgrcodeofpractice/> It must be made clear to the student that the Research Degrees Committee may not always confirm the examiners' recommendations. (Where recommendations do not appear to be fully justified by the reports they may be referred back to the examiners by Research Degrees Committee (see also paragraph 5.3.1.)

On completion of the oral examination, examiners should indicate to the student what amendments and corrections to the thesis are required, if any. They are asked to return a list of corrections and amendments to the Quality Assurance Office (at exams.pgr@keele.ac.uk) as part of their Post-Viva Report, and to provide a copy of this list to the student.