



Guidelines for conducting research degree *viva voce* examinations

Academic Year 2022/23

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This guidance has been produced for use by members of examination panels for research degree students' *viva voce* examinations. It is intended to aid examiners, particularly the internal examiner and/or independent chair, in ensuring the proper and fair conduct of the *viva voce* examination. This guidance is complementary to the requirements for the examination set out in [Section A2 of the regulations](#) and the [Code of practice for research degrees](#) and should be read in conjunction with those documents. Examiners are also advised to familiarise themselves with the [Code of practice on handling allegations of research misconduct](#) and, in the case of Practitioner Doctorates, any programme specific requirements.

1 Role of the chair

- 1.1 Unless an independent chair has been appointed in accordance with [Section A2 of the regulations](#), the internal examiner will perform the dual role of chairing and examining at the *viva voce* examination. The key functions of chairing are to ensure that:
- the *viva voce* examination process is rigorous, fair, reliable and consistent;
 - the candidate has the opportunity to defend the thesis and respond to all questions posed by the examiners;
 - questioning by the examiners is conducted fairly and professionally;
 - the examiners adhere to Section A2 of the regulations, giving advice on these matters if required;
 - the examiners' preliminary reports have been completed, received and discussed prior to the viva;
 - in the case of a remote viva, which participants join via video conferencing, to ensure that the candidate is not disadvantaged by the mode of examination, for example an inability to adequately hear examiner questions due to poor audio quality, and to help resolve or report any technical problems¹;
 - the recommendations of the examiners are communicated clearly to the candidate and in a timely fashion.
- 1.2 An independent chair (if appointed) is not expected to question the candidate about the work being examined; to this end, it is not expected that an independent chair should receive or read a copy of the thesis or portfolio in preparation for the examination.
- 1.3 In the case of disagreement between the examiners, the role of the independent chair (if one has been appointed) or the internal examiner is to advise on the regulatory options. If there is an independent chair, they will *not* have an additional casting vote but should use their best endeavours to help the examiners to reach an agreed position.

¹ University of Surrey IT support: 24 Hour Telephone Support, 01483 689898 | Internal 9898
Information on Microsoft TEAMS: <https://surreynet.surrey.ac.uk/staff-services/it-services/microsoft-teams>

- 1.4 Should any issues arise during the course of the examination, the internal examiner/chair is subsequently able to seek advice on the regulatory options from senior staff in the [Doctoral College](#).

2 The *viva voce* examination

- 2.1 At the start of the examination, the internal examiner/chair should:
- Introduce all parties present, describe the agenda for the viva and check if the candidate has any immediate questions or comments.
 - In the case of a remote viva, also:
 - Ensure that all participants are familiar with the technology including how to raise an issue during the exam;
 - Ensure that participants can contact one another by phone should a problem arise;
 - Check that the meeting link, e.g. for Teams or Zoom, will last for the anticipated duration of the viva;
 - Brief everyone on the arrangements for leaving and re-joining the meeting for the purposes of the pre-viva and post-viva discussions. It is advisable for the chair to send a timetable to all participants in advance of the meeting.
- 2.2 During the examination and the discussion held afterwards, the internal examiner/chair should be prepared to interrupt the examination in the following circumstances:
- To provide advice on regulations, procedures, policy and practice;
 - Where there is any activity that is not rigorous, fair, reliable or consistent;
 - Where there is any activity which contravenes [University policy](#);
 - Where they deem it necessary in a remote viva due to technical issues, which hinder communication to the extent that the meaning is compromised, ambiguous or incomplete, and/or that place additional stress on the candidate.
- 2.3 Should it become necessary to interrupt the normal course of the examination for any of the above reasons, the internal examiner/chair may feel it appropriate to call a temporary intermission in the examination in order to speak with the (other) examiner(s) in private. The internal examiner/chair may recommend terminating and rescheduling the viva in exceptional cases.
- 2.4 When the examiners have finished their discussions with the candidate, the internal examiner/chair should ensure that everyone, including the candidate, has had an opportunity to ask any questions. In the very rare case that a candidate's supervisors are in attendance at the viva, the candidate may wish to speak with the examiners in the absence of the supervisors and the internal examiner/chair should be prepared to facilitate this.
- 2.5 The internal examiner/chair should draw the proceedings to a close, ensuring that all participants know exactly what will happen next, including the timescale for the candidate to receive the examiners' report and any

corrections/revisions. Ordinarily, the internal examiner/chair will ask the candidate to withdraw from the physical or virtual room and to return at an agreed time, while the examiners consider the outcome(s) of the examination and their recommendation. In a remote viva the video conferencing platform may provide a virtual waiting room for the candidate, and their supervisor if they have been in attendance, or they may need to leave the meeting and re-join at a specified time.

3 Examination Outcomes

- 3.1 The examiners will make one of the recommendations permitted by [Section A2 of the regulations](#) and listed on the Examination Form.
- 3.2 In the event that the examiners cannot agree on a joint recommendation, the internal examiner/chair should explain that the examiners are able to submit separate reports. In this event, the Admission Progression and Examination Subcommittee (APESC) would appoint an additional external examiner to review the thesis and the original examiners' reports which will be anonymised. The additional examiner may require the candidate to undergo another *viva voce* examination. The Doctoral College Board would consider the reports of all examiners before reaching a decision.
- 3.3 It is the responsibility of the internal examiner/chair to explain this (very infrequent) procedure to the candidate.

4 Academic Misconduct

If a case of suspected academic misconduct is identified during the course of the examination, then the examination should be suspended and the suspicion reported to the Director of the Doctoral College for investigation in the form of a written report in accordance with the [Code of practice on handling allegations of research misconduct](#). The internal examiner/chair should clearly explain the situation to the candidate and advise the candidate that they will be contacted by the [Research Integrity and Governance Office](#) with further instruction in due course.

5 To conclude the examination

- 5.1 The internal examiner/chair should ensure that the candidate is informed expeditiously of the outcome of the examination. The internal examiner/chair must sign and date the Doctoral Degree *Viva Voce* Examination Form, ensuring that the other examiner(s) also sign to indicate that it is a joint recommendation.
- 5.2 The internal examiner/chair must also ensure that the external examiner(s) complete Section B3 of the Doctoral Degree *Viva Voce* Examination Form, which is used by the University to monitor the quality and integrity of the examination process.
- 5.3 The timeframes for providing lists of corrections to the candidate are set out in [Section A2 of the regulations](#). The table below summarises these:

Outcome	Timeframe	By whom
Specified minor corrections or revisions	10 working days	Internal examiner
Resubmission	10 working days	Research Degrees Officers

5.4 The internal examiner is responsible for ensuring that the following forms are sent to the appropriate Research Degrees Officer² promptly:

- The Doctoral Degree *Viva Voce* Examination Form containing the examiners' joint report and recommendation on the outcome of the viva;
- The examiners' pre-viva reports on the thesis/portfolio;
- Any additional reports on the conduct of the *viva voce* examination;
- Copy of the of the list of corrections or revisions (if applicable);
- Copy of the statement of requirements for a re-submission (if applicable).

5.5 The Research Degrees Officers will retain the original forms; the award recommendation cannot be processed without this paperwork.

5.6 Should the examination raise concerns either in respect to the conduct of the viva itself, or in respect to the management of or provision of resources for the research project the internal examiner/chair should supplement the report forms with a written report to the Chair of APESC.

6 Data Protection

In accordance with Data Protection legislation, examiners' reports may be made available upon request to the candidate after the *viva voce* examination has taken place³.

Approved: November 2020 by APESC

Updated: academic year 2022/23

² researchdegrees@surrey.ac.uk

³ <https://www.surrey.ac.uk/information-governance>