

Preparing for Virtual Viva Voce Examinations

Advice and Guidance for PGRs

We have prepared this advice to demystify the idea of a 'virtual viva', and to help you feel confident and empowered in your preparation. It is important to remember that the fundamentals of the viva are the same whether it is conducted face-to-face or virtually. Although the medium will be different, the content of your viva will not change. Any preparation you have already undertaken will be just as relevant, as will be any advice you have already received.

This guidance is written for postgraduate researchers for whom virtual viva arrangements are already in place. If you are unsure about any aspect of the arrangements for your viva, please consult with your supervisor in the first instance.

The Doctoral College default position is that vivas continue to be conducted online. However, if all parties are in agreement, then the exam can take place either entirely face-to-face or hybrid (some physically together, some participants online).

In drawing up this advice we have consulted with researchers who have experienced virtual viva examinations, as well as referring to other sources, including the UK Council for Graduate Education guide to [Conducting Vivas Online](#).

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Things you can do before the viva

Arrange a mock viva

Mock viva sessions are a great way to prepare for your viva in any circumstances, but if you are getting ready to be examined virtually then arranging to practise virtually will be particularly worthwhile.

Speak to your supervisory team and ask if you can arrange a mock viva with them – thanks to their familiarity with your project, they will have a good idea of the types of question you may be asked.

You can also arrange a mock viva with a member of the Researcher Development Programme team. We won't have the same level of technical knowledge but will be able to advise on what the examiners are looking for, how to structure answers, give feedback on how you come across, and share preparation tips. To request a mock viva, email RDP@surrey.ac.uk

It really helped having a virtual mock viva with RDP, for me to see how I could respond and construct arguments. I'd recommend a virtual mock viva if they are nervous about it being online.

Postgraduate Researcher

Become confident with the technology

Try to get as accustomed to video-conferencing as you can. In addition to your mock viva(s), arrange some conversations with supportive friends or family members – preferably using the same video-conferencing service you will be using in the viva.

Ask for any useful feedback, particularly on audio quality. Can they hear you a little more clearly if you sit closer to the microphone? Is it helpful if you slow down your speech or allow more pauses?

Use the time to make sure you're familiar with any useful settings. For example, it is usually possible to adjust your own view to reduce the size of the window showing your own face, or hide it entirely. Some people feel more comfortable doing this as it can feel unnatural to view your own face while you're speaking.

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Prepare just as you would for a face-to-face viva

As we said above, in its fundamental aspects a virtual viva is the same as a face-to-face viva. Your examiners will have exactly the same types of questions, and any preparation you have already planned to do will be just as relevant.

Refamiliarise yourself with your thesis, be confident in the work you have done, and be prepared for a range of questions about:

- **The novelty of your research** – How does the project contribute to knowledge in your field? Have you applied a new method to an existing problem? Do your findings advance understanding of the topic?
- **Your understanding and use of existing literature** – What are the most significant gaps in the literature and how does your project address them? Which papers most influenced your research and why?
- **Your research design/method/methodology** – Why did you do what you did? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach? What alternatives were there and why did you reject them?
- **Your conclusion or findings** – What are your most important results? What makes them significant and how have you demonstrated this?
- **The limitations of your project** – No research project is perfect. What work was outside of the scope of your project, but could be done in future to take it further? What would you do differently if you were designing the project again?

I think in terms of the questions examiners asked, it is not so different than the normal viva. After the initial questions, I didn't even concentrate on the fact that my examiners weren't physically in the room.

Postgraduate Researcher

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Things you can do on the day of the viva

Prepare your space

Lay out a notebook and pen, glass of water, and any other notes you may wish to refer to (remember that the viva is an 'open book' examination, so supplementary materials are permitted). If you have been able to print a hard copy of your thesis, have it to hand. If you have been unable to print your thesis, have the file open on your PC, or on a tablet, so you are able to refer to specific parts of the thesis.

Where possible, try to optimise the space in which you'll be undertaking the viva. If you have the option, choose somewhere where the lighting is good, and you are least likely to be disturbed. But only do what you can – everyone involved will recognise the challenging circumstances, and no examiner will be concerned about the décor in your room.

Minimise distractions

It can be a good idea to turn off messaging notifications on your phone, tablet and computer, and to turn your phone to silent. Keep your phone in view before the meeting, however, in case your examination team needs to contact you.

Do what you can to reduce the likelihood of interruptions from children, pets, or housemates. But if there are things you cannot change or fully control, acknowledge them and don't worry. Remember that your examiners will be more than aware of the challenging circumstances; indeed, they will be managing similar challenges themselves.

Also, it's best to be ready for any unforeseen circumstances and/or interruptions. It's okay if they happen. They did happen in my case (my examiner's son interrupted and the office phone rang) and it was okay to wait a little and then return to your answers.

Postgraduate Researcher

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Ask questions, ask for a break

Everyone understands that audio quality can fluctuate on a video conference, so don't hesitate to ask an examiner to repeat a question, or to clarify what they are asking. In fact, it's often good to rephrase the question back to the examiner to confirm what they're asking before you begin to answer.

A virtual viva may go on longer than it would have done face-to-face – time can be taken up with initial technical set-up, and communication can be less fluid over webcam. It is perfectly fine to request a break; indeed it may be welcomed by the examiners as well.

Allow pauses and breaths

Try to build some pauses into your responses – allow yourself a few breaths, and the examiners a moment to digest what you've said, before continuing. If you have been talking for a while but feel like there is more you could say, you can pause and ask your examiners if they would like you to continue.

I'd definitely recommend being confident and trying to have a lively discussion however stressful the environment is. I took my time to refer to my work and construct my answer, so it's totally okay if one needs to think things over for a specific question.

Postgraduate Researcher

Stay calm and positive

Don't worry if you're finding it hard to gauge how things are going during the viva. Video-conferencing can make it slightly more difficult to read visual cues such as body language, whilst some examiners might avoid making small interjections or encouraging noises so as not to interrupt your responses. Even in a face-to-face viva it can often be difficult for candidates to judge this – different examiners have different approaches and demeanours.

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Things you can do after your viva

Get support if you need it

These are strange times in which to undergo a viva. But despite the circumstances, and whatever the outcome of your viva, there is a wide range of support available for you to draw upon. Conversations with your supervisory team will help you process the experience, and they can offer guidance to help you work your way through any corrections or revisions you have been asked to complete.

The Researcher Development team in the Doctoral College are available for one-to-one consultations to provide additional advice and support. You have access to the full range of RDP workshops, as well as virtual writing retreats and other activities, while you are working on any corrections. You can also draw upon the confidential professional support available from the [Centre for Wellbeing](#).

Find ways to celebrate

Coming to the end of a doctorate is an extraordinary achievement under any circumstances. Every postgraduate researcher's experience is different, and each encounters challenges and adversity along the way. Submitting your thesis and undertaking your viva is something to be proud of, and you should celebrate it however you can.

If there is one thing that is universally welcome, it is good news – and there is a small army of people out there, from your close friends and family to other researchers, sending you encouragement and waiting to celebrate your achievement.

CONDUCTING VIVAS ONLINE

A Guide for **Institutions and Candidates**



UK Council for
Graduate Education

GUIDANCE FOR DOCTORATE-AWARDING INSTITUTIONS ON CONDUCTING VIVAS REMOTELY

Overview – Online Vivas & Covid-19

The UK Council for Graduate Education is issuing this guidance to assist institutions who, in the light of Covid-19, are rapidly adapting to making online vivas available to larger numbers of candidates who by necessity cannot attend a face to face assessment with examiners.

The advice below is based on existing effective practice we have identified, already taking place in some of our member institutions, and also includes some of our own experience. Please ask your viva chairs, examiners and supervisors to read *both the institutional and candidate guidance* (see below) before any candidate they are examining or supervising experiences an online viva. The usual guidance to participants for the conduct of vivas should still apply (e.g. the need to ensure candidates are put at their ease at the beginning of the viva, that examiners should assure themselves the work is that of the candidate, and making any previously known reasonable adjustments required for individuals). In this document we have added to the usual institutional requirements to accommodate the online situation.

Importantly, following submission of their thesis (or equivalent), during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is the candidate's right to choose the format of their examination. If they are uncomfortable with having an online viva and if their circumstances allow it, they should be permitted to wait until the coronavirus crisis has passed so that a 'normal' viva can take place. Conversely, if they need to complete their degree without delay, it is unreasonable not to offer them an online viva as an alternative. Arrangements may need to be agreed with the sponsors (e.g. research council, charitable trust) of externally funded candidates. It is important to advise international candidates on Tier 4 visas appropriately, making them aware of the potential consequences of postponing their viva, should their visa expiry date be approaching.

The guidance assumes the participation of an independent chair of the viva, a practice not currently adopted in all UK institutions. The chair's role is particularly important in online vivas, however, to ensure the candidate is not disadvantaged and to resolve any technical problems. They also have the authority to stop the viva at any point should they deem this necessary for technical reasons or because they believe the candidate requires a break.

Technology

Using technology to conduct vivas, while it is extremely helpful in situations such as we are all experiencing, does present some challenges for all concerned. None of these is insurmountable as long as everyone remains calm and remembers the importance of the viva for the candidate.

Some institutions may make use of software that enables the viva to be recorded. If you plan to use this facility, all participants should have given permission in advance. Others may decide that the viva chair can maintain an adequate record of the proceedings and that this may be less intrusive to participants.

It is the institution's responsibility to ensure that all participants can access the software chosen to conduct the viva and have sufficient time to practice so that they can become familiar with the technology before the viva takes place. The software will need to accommodate all the anticipated needs of the examination and should include video, so that all participants can see one another. The chair and also the supervisors, if present, should be asked to keep their microphone on mute setting, although the chair may need to un--mute from time to time to ensure the process runs smoothly, or to intervene if problems arise.

Some software enables participants to be placed in a virtual waiting room, where the candidate and any observers of the viva such as supervisors, may be asked to wait briefly before the viva begins, and at the end while the examiners are discussing the outcome.

Prior testing should include checking that the link will last for the anticipated duration of the viva, bearing in mind that the proceedings are likely to take a little longer to allow for delays and any technical hitches.

If necessary, do offer in advance individual tutorials for examiners and candidates and ensure that all participants are comfortable with the process and aware of how the technology is likely to affect the viva.

Process

Online vivas taking place as a result of the coronavirus outbreak will of necessity be different from situations where the candidate is the only remote participant (often the case in other circumstances). All participants will be joining the viva remotely and therefore it is important to give everyone an opportunity to communicate in a way that is easiest for them and most similar to how the viva would normally take place. Some universities may decide that, to be sure the correct individuals are present, participants will be asked to show their university ID at the start of the process.

In advance

Encourage the examiners to contact one another before the exam and if possible to exchange written reports. They should be allotted some time before the viva to discuss their initial impressions of the report, to agree upon the questions they wish to ask the candidate, and to decide on how to manage the exam, including who will ask which questions and similar.

It is less easy to be spontaneous when conducting vivas online; nonetheless the examiners need to agree with the viva chair how to intervene when and if a new question occurs to them. Following their online meeting, it is helpful for the examiners to have a brief discussion with the viva chair about how they wish to proceed, before the exam begins and the candidate joins the meeting.

Have technological help available for all throughout, so that any glitches can be resolved. The person responsible for technology can, for example, be responsible for asking everyone to mute themselves at the start, then make their microphone live while they are speaking.

Ensure that participants may contact one another by phone should a problem arise.

Allow plenty of time before the viva is scheduled to begin for everyone to log in and confirm they are comfortable, with their surroundings and with operating the technology. Ensure that all participants know that if they need a break during the viva, they may take one, by making a request to the chair.

Brief everyone at the start about how they will be interacting. All viva participants are nervous, especially the candidate, and a remote event concerning juggling technology as well as answering examiners' questions, is more than usually challenging. Examiners also have the challenge of making questions clear to the candidate when they aren't in a room together. Please see the penultimate paragraph in the guidance for candidates below for additional information.

Check if the candidate has someone to support them during the viva (a 'buddy'), preferably an academic, but if not, a friend or family member, preferably someone who has experienced a viva. Obviously this person should take no part in the formal examination, but would be there to provide moral support in the way supervisors would. In a coronavirus pandemic, this person may not be able to be present with the candidate; instead they may have a friend or family member 'standing by' on the phone or via video conferencing. The buddy may be one of the candidate's supervisors, if the institution allows, in which case opportunities should be provided for the candidate to communicate privately with them.

In every case, ensure the candidate has had as much support as possible from the institution in advance, including a mock viva held remotely, so they will have had an opportunity to experience the process using technology.

Check that all participants have access to drinking water and anything else they may need.

During the viva and at the end

As in a face-to-face situation, candidates may bring with them to the viva any materials that will help them respond to examiners' questions, in addition to the obvious objects such as their thesis and writing materials so they can take notes if they wish.

Everyone should introduce themselves at the beginning, in the same way as they would in a face to face viva.

Online, vivas should be chaired by an experienced academic (for example someone from the candidate's department but not the internal examiner), who can manage participants' interactions. Make sure that person is fully aware of the role and understands they are there to facilitate communication between the participants, especially to assure the wellbeing of the candidate. As is usual with independent chairs of vivas, they should take no part in the exam. In the online situation, the chair should look carefully for any distress the candidate might be experiencing and if necessary be able to have a private conversation

with them to resolve the problem. This may mean going off-line for a short time then returning to negotiate a short break in proceedings.

The institution's normal regulations about the presence of supervisors should also apply to remote vivas. For example, with the candidate's permission, in many universities supervisors are permitted to attend the viva but only to observe, not take an active role. It may be particularly reassuring for candidates to see their supervisors are present.

Develop a procedure for the end of the viva that mirrors the normal procedure where the candidate leaves the room while the examiners have a discussion, then returns to hear the outcome. It is important, irrespective of the outcome, that the candidate is not alone following the viva. For most this will be a time for celebrating the successful culmination of their studies (even remotely), but for others, the outcome will be less pleasing than they were expecting, for example, the examiners may recommend major rather than minor corrections (still a pass!).

In the current situation try to establish that the candidate will have a friend or family member 'standing by' on the phone or using other media at the end of the viva, if there is no-one else in their household.

Before everyone logs off, the chair is responsible for congratulating the candidate, and importantly, ensuring that all participants know exactly what will happen next, including the timescale for the candidate to receive the examiners' report.

GUIDANCE FOR DOCTORAL CANDIDATES EXPERIENCING ONLINE VIVAS

We have developed the following guidance for candidates, knowing that the doctoral examination is 'high stakes' and that you will be nervous about it, even before having to deal with the added pressure of meeting the examiners remotely.

First, please read the guidelines for institutions above, to check that arrangements for your own viva take account of the effective practice set out. If, having done that, you are concerned there might be any 'gaps' in the preparatory arrangements, contact your supervisors as soon as possible. It is your university's responsibility, not yours, to make arrangements for your online viva, so there should be no pressure on you to take the initiative.

During the coronavirus pandemic, after submission and in the run-up to the examination, you should not feel under pressure to accept an online viva if you would prefer not to and if your circumstances (including your sponsor if you are a funded candidate) permit postponing it until the coronavirus crisis is over. Conversely, if you require your viva to take place without delay because you need to move on with your career, it is unacceptable for your university not to make suitable arrangements for the viva to be conducted online. International candidates on Tier 4 visas should bear in mind the potential consequences of postponing their viva, should their visa expiry date be approaching.

On the UKCGE website you will find some slides and text used by two colleagues in a UK university to help candidates prepare for their vivas. The advice given there is also relevant to online vivas and may help you to stay calm and prepare well for the exam. In addition, we are providing the guidance below. We would like to acknowledge the material made available via Twitter by two individuals in particular: Jemima Short, PhD candidate, Newcastle University, UK; and Dr Ethan White, Florida University, USA, which has influenced our guidance. Thanks to both for sharing their experiences.

If at all possible, try and arrange for someone to be with you during the viva. Obviously they should take no part in the formal examination, but would be there to provide moral support in the way your supervisors would. In a coronavirus pandemic, this may not be possible of course, in which case have a friend or family member 'standing by' on the phone or via video conferencing, especially at the end of the viva.

While using technology could present practical challenges, if everyone involved in the viva is patient, keeps calm and approaches it with good humour, the technology itself shouldn't add to the stress, although it might mean the process takes slightly longer. As in face to face vivas, it is not a problem to pause: while considering an examiner's question; while waiting for them to respond or to ask the next question; or to ask them to repeat a question if you haven't understood.

An independent academic should be present to chair the viva. As in a face to face viva, they are there to facilitate the smooth running of the viva and to ensure the university's process is followed appropriately. Their role includes ensuring the technology is working correctly, that all participants are comfortable and can make the technology work, and most importantly that you, the candidate, are

happy with the process. If you need a break, or have any other problem, just ask the chair if they can pause the viva briefly and let you speak with them privately.

The university will have put in place arrangements for your examiners to advise you when they are ready for the viva to begin (e.g. by email), and should have also established a form of contact (e.g. phone) in case you need to make contact separately from the online technology.

Those who have experienced online vivas have provided useful practical advice, including: the possibility of speech distortion; and the need for the person speaking to pause occasionally so other participants can indicate if they haven't heard, or have missed something -- as in a face to face viva, you shouldn't be afraid to ask questions, for clarification, or for something to be repeated. Another useful practical tip is to keep your desk clear and only have in front of you things you will need during the viva, such as a copy of your thesis and some writing materials, as well as enough water to last you through the exam. It is also important you won't be interrupted during the viva (have your phone in silent mode while ensuring you can see who is calling) and that your environment is as quiet as possible. The most important thing is that you should feel as comfortable as possible during the viva: there is no need to dress differently from normal unless a different style will make you feel more relaxed, or more formal, whichever suits you.

Finally, try to enjoy your viva – focus on your work and the examiners' questions and put in place some celebratory arrangements at the end, even if they are remote.

Good luck!

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