

# Preparing for Virtual Confirmation 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. But 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 confirmation 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 confirmation viva arrangements are already in place. If you are unsure about any aspect of the arrangements for your confirmation, please consult with your supervisor in the first instance.

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

### Confirm the arrangements for your viva

One of the best things you can do to help feel prepared is to ensure you are clear about the arrangements and requirements for the viva. When will it take place? Will it be held on Zoom, or a different platform? Consult with your supervisor if there are any details you are unsure about. In most cases your supervisor will act as chair during the viva itself, taking responsibility for setting up the video-conference and managing any IT issues that arise.

If you have not yet submitted your confirmation report, make sure you clearly understand the requirements and format for the report itself, including any department-specific guidelines. The [Research Degrees Office](#) (RDO) can help with queries you may have regarding progress milestones, regulations, and processes relating to PhD, MD and MPhil programmes. This includes questions about some aspects of your confirmation, such as the submission of the Confirmation Examination Nomination Form and the confirmation report.

### Arrange a mock viva

Mock viva sessions are a great way to prepare for a 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](mailto: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**

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### 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.

### 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 confirmation report, be confident in the work you have done, and be prepared for a range of questions about:

- **The potential for novelty in your research** – How will the project contribute to knowledge in your field? Are you applying a new method to an existing problem? Will your anticipated findings advance our understanding of the topic?
- **Your critical engagement with the existing literature** – What gaps have you identified in the literature? How will your project address them?
- **Your research design/method/methodology** – What are the strengths and weaknesses of your proposed approach? What alternative approaches are there, and why have you rejected them? Will you consider an alternative approach if your project does not progress in the ways you are anticipating?
- **Your initial findings** – What are your most important results or findings so far? What makes them significant? How will they influence the next stage of your project?

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- **Your timeline, plans, and potential risks** – Are you prepared to adapt if your research does not progress as you have anticipated? Do you have a 'Plan B'? What are the most significant risks to your plans, and how will you mitigate them?

**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**

## 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 (remembering that supplementary materials are permitted). If you have been able to print a hard copy of your confirmation report, have it to hand. If you have been unable to print your report, have the file open on your PC, or on a tablet, so you are able to refer to specific parts of the report.

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.

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**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**

### **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

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it can often be difficult for candidates to judge this – different examiners have different approaches and demeanours.

## Things you can do after your viva

### Get support if you need it

Whatever the outcome of your confirmation, 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 address any feedback from your examiners.

Whether you have been asked to revise your confirmation report or are ready to continue with your research plans, the Researcher Development team in the Doctoral College are available for one-to-one consultations to provide additional advice and support. Consider taking advantage of the wide range of RDP workshops, virtual writing retreats, and careers guidance. Remember that you can also draw upon the confidential professional support available from the [Centre for Wellbeing](#) at any stage in your doctorate.