

Procedure for Conducting Viva Voce Examinations for Research Degrees Programmes (MPhil, PhD and MD[Res])

Introduction

1. This Procedure sets out the required steps and responsibilities for the preparation, conduct and reporting of the *viva voce* examination ('viva') for research degree programmes (MPhil, PhD and MD[Res]). It defines how vivas are to be organised and conducted, the documentation that must be completed, and the arrangements for recording and communicating examination outcomes. This Procedure should be read alongside the [Regulations for Research Programmes of Study \(MPhil, PhD and MD\[Res\]\)](#).

Purpose and Status of the Viva Voce Examination

2. The viva is an academic assessment required under the [Regulations for Research Programmes of Study \(MPhil, PhD and MD\[Res\]\)](#). Its purpose is to enable examiners to explore and test the thesis through structured questioning and to assess the student's ability to defend, explain and contextualise their research. Through this process, examiners evaluate the student's understanding of their work, its originality, significance and integrity, and its place within the wider discipline. The viva is a formal examination and should not be understood as a pastoral meeting, progress review or supervisory discussion. All decisions are made solely on the basis of the joint academic judgement of the examiners, in accordance with the Regulations.

Scope and Applicability

3. This Procedure applies to all vivas conducted for research degree programmes and is relevant to all individuals and bodies involved in their delivery, administration, oversight or review.
4. Without limitation, this includes:
 - examiners (internal and external), supervisors, independent observers (where appointed), and relevant professional services staff involved in viva arrangements and processing;
 - students registered for the degrees of MPhil, PhD and MD(Res), including re-entry examinations.
5. The Procedure applies to vivas conducted on any university campus or, where exceptionally approved, at other locations or by approved modalities.

Roles and Responsibilities

6. To ensure a fair, rigorous and transparent examination process, the following roles and responsibilities apply:

7. External Examiner

- Provides independent, expert academic scrutiny of the thesis and the student's viva performance.
- Prepares an independent preliminary report and contributes fully to the Joint Report.
- Ensures that the viva is conducted impartially and in accordance with the Regulations and this Procedure.
- Brings an external perspective to confirm that academic standards are comparable with those of other UK research-intensive universities.

For further information, see the [Roles and Responsibilities Research Degree External Examiners](#).

8. Internal Examiner

- Provides expert academic scrutiny of the thesis and the student's viva performance.
- Prepares an independent preliminary report and contributes fully to the Joint Report.
- Ensures that the viva is conducted impartially and in accordance with the Regulations and this Procedure.
- Acts as the primary liaison with the Assessment Records Team in Registry on procedural and administrative matters.

9. Supervisor

- Coordinates arrangements for the viva, including setting the date and location with examiners and the student, through consultation with the Assessment Records Team.
- May attend the viva only as an observer if explicitly invited by the student.
- Must not participate in the viva or influence examiners' academic judgments.

10. Student

- Attends the viva as scheduled and engages with the process.
- Completes any required post-viva thesis amendments within the time period specified by the examiners.
- Communicates with the Assessment Records Team, not examiners, regarding post-viva requirements.

11. Independent Observer (if appointed)

- Attends solely to observe the conduct and procedural fairness of the viva.
- Does not question the student or contribute to the academic assessment.

12. Assessment Records Team

- Issues examiner documentation and provides procedural guidance.
- Receives and processes all examination reports and forms.
- Issues formal notifications of outcomes to students.
- Ensures that all examination processes align with the Regulations.

Eligibility to Examine

13. Examiners must be appointed in line with the criteria set out in the [Procedure for Appointment of Examiners for Research Degrees \(MPhil, PhD, MD\(Res\), EngD\)](#).

Preliminary Independent Reports

14. Examiners may raise any queries about the thesis with the supervisor in advance of the viva. Any questions concerning the university's [Regulations for Research Programmes of Study \(MPhil, PhD and MD\[Res\]\)](#) should be directed to the Assessment Records Team. All matters relating to the examination are confidential and examiners should not contact any third party, other than the supervisor, as permitted by the Regulations and this Procedure.

Reasonable Adjustments and Accessibility

15. The university is committed to ensuring that viva examinations are accessible and compliant with the Equality Act 2010. Any reasonable adjustments must be approved in advance by the Disability Advisory Service and communicated to examiners via appointment documentation. If examiners are informed directly by the supervisor or student of any disability, even in confidence, they should seek the advice of the Assessment Records Team, or the [Disability Advisory Service](#), to receive guidance on the appropriate reasonable adjustments.
16. Examiners must consider a student's Suggested Reasonable Adjustments Document (SRAD) in line with the [Procedures for Consideration of Additional Examination Arrangements in Respect of Disability](#). The student must not disclose personal medical information directly to examiners. Any concerns related to adjustments or accessibility should be referred to the Assessment Records Team prior to the viva.
17. Remote or hybrid vivas approved as reasonable adjustments must comply with the [Policy on the Modality of Research Degree Final Thesis Vivas](#). Remote or hybrid vivas require approval by the Director of Postgraduate Studies.

Viva Voce Examination

18. To be read in conjunction with Section 15: Conduct of Examinations of the [Regulations for Research Programmes of Study \(MPhil, PhD and MD\[Res\]\)](#).

Arranging the Viva

19. When the thesis is despatched to the examiners, the student's supervisor is responsible for contacting the examiners and the student to arrange and confirm a mutually convenient time and place for the viva. The viva should take place in a private, quiet and interruption-free environment with appropriate seating and acoustics. Recording is not permitted unless authorised as part of a reasonable adjustment.
20. Remote or hybrid vivas may be considered in accordance with the [Policy on the modality of research degree final thesis vivas](#). The student's positive consent must be obtained for a remote or hybrid viva, and

approval must be secured from the Director of Postgraduate Studies. Arrangements must be confirmed with the Assessment Records Team in advance.

Attendance and Observers

21. The supervisor may not attend the viva unless invited by the student to do so as an observer. If present, the supervisor must not take part in the examination. Examiners must indicate on the Result Sheet whether the supervisor attended.
22. Normally only the examiners, the student and, if invited, one supervisor may be present. In exceptional circumstances, including the early stages of a collaborative research degree partnership, the Academic Registrar may appoint an independent observer to attend.

Conduct of the Viva

23. Before meeting the student, the examiners should discuss the approach they intend to take and outline this at the outset of the viva.
24. During the viva, the examiners should use structured questioning to evaluate the student's understanding of the research, their ability to defend the thesis, and to explore any matters arising from the written work. Where the integrity or authorship of the research is in doubt, examiners must contact the Assessment Records Team. Any allegation of academic misconduct will be managed under the [Investigation of Allegations of Research Misconduct](#).
25. There are no prescribed requirements for the duration or format of a viva; however, it must be conducted in a manner that provides the student with suitable opportunity, encouragement and time to explain and defend their work. Questioning should be probing but professional. Examiners may offer short breaks during longer examinations.
26. If the student or an examiner becomes unwell and cannot continue, the viva should be suspended after discussion with the student and, where possible, the supervisor. Examiners should then judge whether sufficient evidence has been gathered or whether the viva must be reconvened. Such circumstances must be clearly recorded in the final report.
27. If the student attempts to exert undue influence, for example, by referring to the personal consequences of failure or offering an incentive, the viva must be terminated and the circumstances recorded in the final report.

Deliberation and Informal Feedback

28. At the conclusion of the viva, the student and the supervisor (if present) must withdraw while the examiners confer in private. Procedural clarification must be sought only from the Assessment Records Team. Supervisors must not be consulted on the student's performance or the outcome.
29. Examiners may offer the student an informal verbal indication of the likely outcome, particularly where the outcome is a pass or a pass subject to minor amendments. Examiners must make clear that this indication is not the formal result. The formal outcome is issued only when the university notifies the student following submission of the examiners' report and completion of all requirements.

The Result of the Examination

30. The options open to examiners in determining the results of the MPhil, PhD and MD(Res) examinations are set out in Section 15 of the [Regulations for Research Programmes of Study \(MPhil, PhD and MD\[Res\]\)](#). Where requirements differ between awards, examiners must ensure they refer to the correct set of available outcomes for the degree being examined. Guidance is provided at Annex A to this policy and procedure.

Reporting Examination Outcomes to the university

31. The Assessment Records Team will provide examiners with a set of documents, including the Result Sheet. Examiners must complete and sign the Result Sheet to confirm the agreed outcome, and must also submit a Joint Report explaining the basis for their decision. The Joint Report should be provided on a separate document and must include:
- the student's name;
 - the thesis title;
 - the signatures of all examiners; and
 - the date of submission.
32. The Joint Report should address the requirements for the relevant award and provide a clear rationale for the examiners' recommendation. It should not refer to the examiners' preliminary reports unless the examiners wish the student to receive copies of those reports.
33. If the examiners refer the student to revise and resubmit the thesis with minor or major amendments, they must clearly specify the ways in which the current thesis does not meet the required standards. They should outline the revisions expected but are not required to provide exhaustive detail. Students must complete the required amendments and resubmit the revised thesis for examination within nine months in the case of minor amendments and within 18 months in the case of major amendments.
34. If the examiners refer the student for major amendments, they must state in the Joint Report whether a further viva will be required. A decision not to hold a further viva is only available following the student's first examination and should be considered as part of the overall assessment. If the examiners wish to defer their decision until they have reviewed the revised thesis, this must be stated in the report.
35. If the examiners determine that the student has not met the standard required for the PhD and is not eligible to re-submit a revised thesis for that award, they must consider whether the thesis does, or could after revision, meet the criteria for the award of the MPhil in accordance with the [Regulations for Research Programmes of Study \(MPhil, PhD and MD\[Res\]\)](#). The MPhil is an independent award and may only be granted where its criteria are fully met. It is not a compensatory award for an unsuccessful PhD examination.
36. If the examiners' decision is to fail the student outright, they must provide the reasons for rejecting all other available outcome options. Except in very exceptional circumstances, a fail decision should not be made without first conducting a viva.

Student Responsibilities Following the Examination

37. Students must complete any amendments required by the examiners within the timeframe set out in the Regulations and the result sheet. All communication regarding amendments must be conducted through the Assessment Records Team; students must not contact examiners directly.

Timetable for Examination Outcomes

38. At the conclusion of the viva, the examiners are responsible for agreeing how they will draft and finalise their Joint Report. They must then submit the Joint Report, the Result Sheet, their preliminary reports and their copies of the thesis to the Assessment Records Team.
39. The university expects the examination process to be completed, and the final Joint Report and all required documentation submitted, within two weeks of the viva. If the examiners are unable to meet this timeframe, they must inform the Assessment Records Team as soon as possible.
40. If the examiners have indicated on the Result Sheet that amendments are required, the Assessment Records Team will send a further form to the examiners named on the Result Sheet. This form must be completed to confirm that the amendments have been made satisfactorily and that the criteria for the degree have been met.
41. Where the student has been referred for major amendments and the viva has been deferred, the university expects the examiners to submit their final Joint Report and all relevant documentation within three months of the revised thesis being despatched. If this timeframe cannot be met, the Assessment Records Team must be notified as soon as possible.
42. MPhil, PhD and MD(Res) degrees are formally awarded on the first day of each month. For the degree to be awarded in a given month, the examiners' report must have been received by the Assessment Records Team and the final thesis must have been submitted to the university's digital repository by the last day of the preceding month.
43. Examiners may submit confidential comments to the university in a separate report. These comments should not normally relate to the student's performance, but may address any matters the examiners wish to draw to the university's attention.

Data Protection and Information Handling

44. Examiners must handle all examination materials securely and in accordance with the College's [Data Protection Policy](#). Theses, preliminary reports, joint reports and correspondence must not be shared with any unauthorised individuals. All examination materials should be deleted or securely destroyed in line with the university's [Retention Schedule](#).

Formal Notification to the Student

45. If the examiners reach a unanimous decision and there are no unresolved anomalies, the outcome will be communicated to the student. However, official notification of the examination result cannot be issued until all reports have been received, any anomalies have been resolved, and the outcome has been formally processed by the university.

46. At the point of official notification, the student will receive a copy of the Result Sheet and the Joint Report. The examiners' preliminary reports are not normally shared with the student unless the examiners specifically request this. Preliminary reports will, however, be released to the student if they submit an academic appeal against the examination outcome.

Examination of Deferred Students

47. It is expected that the original examiners will examine the student on re-entry.
48. When examining a re-entry student, the examiners should refer to the report they produced for the first examination. Copies of this report can be made available to them.
49. Examiners have discretion as to whether a further viva is required for a revised and resubmitted thesis. However, they should consider any statement made on this matter in their joint report from the original examination.
50. When the revised thesis is despatched to the examiners, the supervisor will be asked to contact the examiners to confirm whether a viva is required and, if so, to make the necessary arrangements.
51. The deferred examination for the PhD is subject to the same Regulations and procedures as the original examination, and all outcomes set out in the [Regulations for Research Programmes of Study \(MPhil, PhD and MD\[Res\]\)](#) remain available to the examiners, unless stated.

If Examiners Cannot Reach a Joint Decision or Require Further Assistance

52. If the examiners are unable to reach an agreement, they should contact the Assessment Records Team for advice in the first instance. The examination reports will then be referred to a panel comprising the Director of the Early Career Researcher Institute, a University Consul for the relevant faculty and the Academic Registrar (or nominee). This panel will determine the appropriate course of action.

Equal Opportunities

53. All examinations are subject to the university's [Equal Opportunities Policy](#). All students are subject to the same academic criteria and requirements.

Appeals Procedure

54. Academic appeals will be considered in accordance with the university's [Academic Appeals Procedure for Research Programmes](#).

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Guidance on Examination Outcomes Involving Amendments for Postgraduate Research Degrees

Introduction

1. This guidance addresses postgraduate research degree examination outcomes that require typographical, minor, or major amendments. It is intended to support examiners in determining the appropriate outcome following the viva voce examination. It provides illustrative examples of the matters that may typically fall within each category. The examples are not exhaustive, and academic judgement should always be exercised with reference to the criteria for the award of the degree.
2. Full details of the possible outcomes of examination can be found in the *Regulations for Research Programmes of Study* for MPhil/PhD/MD[Res] programmes or the relevant academic regulations for EngD programmes which can be found at [Academic Regulations | About | Imperial College London](#)

Principles

3. In applying outcomes involving minor or major amendments, examiners should be guided by the following principles:
 - a. Examiners should ensure that the decision and any associated requirements are clearly specified and aligned with the selected outcome.
 - b. The nature, volume and complexity of any required amendments or further work must be proportionate to, and consistent with, the outcome agreed by the examiners.
 - c. The guidance is intended to support consistency and fairness, not to replace academic judgement.

Examination Outcomes

Pass – Typographical Amendments Only (Up to One Month to Complete)

4. Typographical amendments are purely presentational and do not affect the academic content, structure, analysis, or conclusions of the thesis.
5. Typical examples include:
 - a. Spelling, punctuation, or grammatical errors
 - b. Formatting inconsistencies (e.g. headings, numbering, fonts)
 - c. Minor referencing errors where the correct source is already clearly identifiable
 - d. Incorrect or inconsistent labelling of figures or tables

- e. Minor layout corrections (e.g. line spacing, margins)

Pass, Subject to Minor Amendments (Up to Six Months to Complete)

- 6. Minor amendments are required where the thesis meets the criteria for the award, but the examiners judge that limited clarification, tightening, or correction is needed to improve clarity, coherence, or presentation.
- 7. Typical examples include:
 - a. Improving clarity, coherence, or signposting in sections where the underlying argument is acceptable but not expressed as clearly as it could be.
 - b. Strengthening engagement with the literature in specific sections.
 - c. Expanding or refining the discussion of results without introducing new data.
 - d. Making explicit the impact of acknowledged methodological limitations on interpretation and claims.
 - e. Improving coherence between chapters (e.g. clearer signposting or conclusions).
 - f. Correcting minor factual errors that do not undermine the overall findings.
 - g. Minor amendments must not require substantial new analysis, data collection, or re conceptualisation of the research.

Not Pass, Major Amendments Required (Up to 18 Months to Complete)

- 8. Major amendments are appropriate where the thesis does not yet meet the criteria for the award, but the examiners judge that it demonstrates sufficient scope and potential to be brought to the required standard through revision and resubmission.
- 9. Typical examples include:
 - a. Weaknesses in the conceptual framework or research design that require substantial revision or clarification to ensure alignment with the research questions.
 - b. Gaps in the methodology requiring re analysis or further work using existing data to ensure robustness and coherence.
 - c. Further experimental work¹ and data analysis is required, or substantial shortcomings in data analysis or interpretation that must be addressed to support the study's conclusions.
 - d. Conclusions that require clearer alignment with the evidence presented, including re-articulation and reframing to reflect the finding and analysis more accurately.

¹ Recommendations for further experimental work or data collection should be made with due regard to practical feasibility, including time, funding, and resource constraints. Where such work is not realistically achievable, examiners should instead consider where the concerns can be addressed through revision of analysis, interpretation, or presentation. Alternatively, an MPhil exit award may be considered for PhD or EngD candidates.

- e. Inadequate engagement with key literature that must be strengthened to support the originality, positioning, or contribution of the research.
- f. Inconsistent demonstration of doctoral level criticality across the thesis, requiring substantive revision to analysis, synthesis, and evaluative depth.