

Good Practice Guidance – Preparing for Remote Doctoral *Vivas*

This guidance note is for supervisors arranging and internal examiners taking part in remote doctoral *viva* examinations. It is designed to provide practical guidance on preparing for the remote examination to ensure that it runs smoothly.

The guidance is based on the UK Council for Graduate Education's document, conducting online *vivas*¹ but it also includes examples of best practice currently being adopted by Departments across the College (we thank those who shared their practices).

Our top five tips in preparing for a remote *viva* are to:

1. Check that all parties have access to and are familiar with using the digital technology being used for the examination.
2. Find out whether any reasonable adjustments are needed for the exam and implement these. Establish whether the senior tutor (PGR) is needed to provide additional support to the student, before and after the examination.
3. Arrange a mock-*viva*.
4. Arrange a pre-*viva* meeting between the internal and external examiners.
5. Use the pre-*viva* meeting to:
 - Agree initial impressions of the thesis, questions to ask and whether follow-up is required with the supervisor ahead of the exam.
 - How the remote *viva* will be conducted, including practicalities – this will also inform your briefing to students at the start of their exam.
 - A procedure for the end of the *viva*.

Pre *Viva*

Digital considerations

It is important to recognise that some students may not have access to the same technology that staff or other students have access to. Departments should offer each student an assessment of their digital needs for the *viva* examination and, where possible, provide or facilitate the provision of appropriate equipment.

ICT have specific recommendations about which software should be used for audio and video meetings. ICT strongly advise that [Microsoft Teams](#) is used. Zoom is not supported by the College and ICT cannot guarantee if any data shared and discussions held on this platform are secure and/or in compliance with the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Departments should ask all participants (student and examiners) to familiarise themselves with the chosen software ahead of the *viva* and consider whether the examiners and student require a software tutorial before the *viva* takes place.

Please note that *vivas* should not be recorded.

¹ <http://www.ukcge.ac.uk/media/download.aspx?MediaId=2252>

Arranging a mock viva

It is good practice for Supervisors to arrange a **mock remote viva**. A mock *viva* is an opportunity for students to carry out a “tech check,” a chance to practice using the software ahead of the examination and to familiarise themselves with the process.

Supporting students

If supervisors and/or Departments are concerned about the student’s progression or physical/mental health, then arrangements should be made for the Department’s Senior Tutor (PGR) to be available to the student for a pre and post *viva* meeting.

It may also be necessary to make reasonable adjustments to the conduct of the examination to take account of students with disabilities or specific learning needs.

Timing and location of the viva

When arranging the *viva*, supervisors and/or Departments should consider where the student and examiners are (geographically) when setting the time(zone) for the examination.

Pre-viva meeting for examiners

In the usual way, examiners should **exchange their preliminary written reports** ahead of the *viva*. The internal examiner should set up a remote virtual meeting to discuss these and so the examiners can meet each other prior to the examination. Examiners should discuss their initial impressions of the thesis, identify whether they need to raise any queries with the student’s main supervisor and agree the questions they wish to ask the student during the examination. If necessary, the examiners could also virtually meet with the supervisor to discuss queries.

During this preliminary discussion, examiners should **also decide how to manage the remote exam**, including who will ask which questions, a process for how to intervene should a new question occur and if reasonable adjustments are to be made.

The examiners should **develop a procedure for the end of the viva** that mirrors the normal procedure where the student leaves the room so the examiners can discuss the outcome and then returns to hear the outcome. For example, the student (and supervisor if present) could be asked to move into the virtual waiting room and then return when the outcome is agreed. Before everyone logs off, all participants should know exactly what will happen next, including the timescale for the student to receive the examiners’ report and how feedback, such as minor corrections, will be provided to the student remotely.

The examiners should also **develop a procedure to follow should the student become distressed**. It is suggested that the internal examiner has available the contact details of the supervisor and the Department’s Senior Tutor (PGR). The College’s [Student Support Zone](#) provides helpful information should the examiners become concerned about the welfare of a student.

Other practicalities to be discussed at this meeting include when to schedule breaks and how these will be managed.

A process should be developed which enables participants to remain in contact with each other in the event of technology failure. Some options are:

- staff can divert their College telephone number to their home/mobile number remotely by using the [telephony self-service tool](#). You can then provide all participants with your College telephone number and you will be reachable at home or on your mobile.
- set up a separate conference call where participants can call a central number.
- alternatively, if all participants are comfortable doing so, personal numbers can be exchanged. This is not usually recommended but the pandemic has presented exceptional circumstances. If participants do exchange personal numbers, there should be an agreement at the end of the examination to delete all personal numbers.

A template agenda for the pre-viva meeting between examiners is attached as **Appendix 1**.

At the viva

Usually the internal examiner should set up the *viva* examination, including managing entry to the online meeting, setting up virtual waiting rooms and ensuring that the exam is conducted under appropriate conditions.

ID verification - Imperial requires all participants to show their ID cards at the start of the examination. Webcams should remain on throughout the duration of the examination.

Wellbeing - Examiners should check on the wellbeing of the student before the *viva* starts. Is the student self-isolating or is anyone else with them in their household/accommodation? They should be particularly sensitive to the wellbeing of the student when the outcome of the examination is delivered to the student and suspend the *viva* and ask about the student's wellbeing if they notice the student becoming distressed during the *viva*.

All participants should have access to water throughout the examination and have access to everything they need.

Briefing on the examination – Examiners should have agreed, at their pre-meeting, the practicalities for how the examination will be conducted. These should be communicated to the student at the start of the *viva*.

Regardless of the outcome, students should be congratulated on completing their *viva* examination (and hopefully on the result) and, in cases where the outcome may not be as positive as they'd hoped, establish that the student has a friend or family member that they can talk to (or that the supervisor can be on call to support, if necessary).

Appendix 1: Template agenda for examiner pre-viva meeting

1. Welcome and introductions

2. Discussion of preliminary written reports

- discussion of initial impressions of the thesis
- identification of whether any queries need to be raised with the student's main supervisor
- agreement of questions to ask the student during the examination and who will ask them
- a process for how to intervene should a new question occur

3. Are any reasonable adjustments needed for the examination?

4. Procedure for the end of the *viva*

- A procedure should be developed that mirrors the usual procedure where the student leaves the room so the examiners can discuss the outcome and then returns to hear the outcome. For example, the student (and supervisor if present) could be asked to move into the virtual waiting room and then return when the outcome is agreed.
- Before everyone logs off, all participants should know exactly what will happen next, including the timescale for the student to receive the examiners' report and how feedback, such as minor corrections, will be provided to the student remotely.
- Whatever procedure is decided here needs to be communicated to the students at the start of their examination as part of your briefing.

5. Procedure to follow should the student become distressed

- It is suggested that the internal examiner has available the contact details of the supervisor and the Department's Senior Tutor (PGR) to hand. The College's [Student Support Zone](#) provides helpful information should the examiners become concerned about the welfare of a student.

6. Frequency of breaks and how these will be managed

7. Technology failure – agree how participants will remain in contact with each other. Consider the following options:

- Set up a conference call
- divert College telephone numbers to home/mobile numbers
- If all are comfortable doing this, exchange personal number, remembering to delete these at the end of the examination.

8. Agree the briefing note to students – this should summarise what has been agreed during discussion of points 4-7 of this agenda and **a reminder to all participants that *vivas* should not be recorded.**