

# Guidance for distant Viva Voce examinations and thesis submission during the Covid 19 situation<sup>1</sup>

This guidance applies from 1<sup>st</sup> April 2020 to all Postgraduate Research (PGR) thesis submissions and examinations at the University of Sussex, and should be read in addition to appendix 2 of the [Handbook for Supervisors and Directors of Doctoral Studies](#) ('Distant Vivas').

It is acknowledged that viva voce examinations will not be able to operate with the co-location of Postgraduate Research Students (PGRs) and examiners during the current Covid19 outbreak. To minimise disruption to PGRs the University supports Distant Vivas, or – where possible and appropriate – a delay<sup>2</sup> to the scheduling of vivas.

All thesis submissions will operate online until further notice. PGRs are asked to email optimised/compressed PDFs, or share via [Box](#) to [researchexams@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:researchexams@sussex.ac.uk). All processes (E.g. distribution of theses to examiners, or adding an accompanying summary of changes for corrected theses) will operate online, following standard processes.

## 1. Summary of Distant Viva Process

- i. Internal examiners should seek the agreement of all parties<sup>3</sup> to convene a Distant Viva, and agree the time, date, locations and supporting technology to be used.
- ii. Schools must nominate a (normally) senior member of Sussex Faculty to act as a Viva Chair<sup>4</sup>.
- iii. Schools must notify the [Research Student Administration Office](#) (RSAO) of
  - a. Names of all parties and confirmation of their agreement to a Distant Viva, Viva date and time,
  - b. that teleconferencing (Skype/Zoom etc.) has been tested,
  - c. the availability of suitable/private locations.
- iv. The Viva Chair must submit a short post-viva report to RSAO confirming whether the viva ran appropriately, and that the judgment of examiners and the PGR performance was not compromised by the viva format.

## 2. Distant Viva: additional notes

- i. No recordings of the examination must take place by any party; no evidence based on recordings of the viva will be permissible in any appeal process.
- ii. With the agreement of all parties, Supervisors may be in virtual attendance during vivas, but must not participate in the viva in any way unless they are directly addressed by examiners.
- iii. In addition, or instead of Supervisors, candidates can nominate and have a supporter/observer present with them either for the entire viva, or for the

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<sup>1</sup>This guidance has been developed following the sharing of best practice across the UK HE sector via the Academic Registrars' Council, and specifically builds on similar guidance from the University of Nottingham. Further guidance on Distant Vivas for PGRs candidates has been developed by the [UK Council for Graduate Education](#).

<sup>2</sup>PGRs should consult with their Supervisors if they wish to delay a viva. Tier4 sponsored PGRs should consider visa implications, considering date of visa expiry and maintaining engagements.

<sup>3</sup>'all parties' refers to PGR candidate, internal examiner, external examiner and viva chair

<sup>4</sup>See 5 for further details on the role and criteria to act as a Viva Chair

communication of the recommended outcome. This individual is not allowed to contribute in any way to the conduct of the viva, and must be introduced at the start.

### **3. Technological considerations**

- i. It is recommended that the viva be conducted using Microsoft Teams, Skype for Business or Zoom<sup>5</sup>, however other platforms can be used if agreed by all participants.
- ii. The viva must commence using both video and audio, however video does not need to be maintained by all parties throughout. The internal examiner or Viva Chair must confirm the identity of the candidate at the start of the viva.
- iii. If there is a failure in the connection/technology, attempts should be made to re-connect. It is suggested that attempts to reconnect could halt after 20 minutes, with the agreement of all parties.
- iv. The decision to postpone, re-convene or conclude a viva should be made by the Viva Chair.
- v. If the viva has to be halted (for technological or any reasons), the Viva Chair should consult with the examiners via an alternative method (e.g. telephone) to ascertain if sufficient discussion had taken place for a viva outcome to be recommended to the Research Degrees Examination Board.

### **4. During and after the viva**

- i. It is expected that Distant Vivas follow the same protocols and format to a standard viva. Examiners will agree a viva structure appropriate to their discipline, but this might include:
  - a. A pre-viva online meeting involving examiners and the Viva Chair only.
  - b. A short overview or summary of the thesis by the candidate (if requested by examiners).
  - c. Standard viva questions and lines of enquiry.
  - d. A post-viva meeting of examiners and the Viva Chair in which the examiners discuss the candidate's performance and agree the recommended outcome. The candidate must leave the online meeting at this point, and be advised by the Viva Chair on how and when they will be contacted to invite them back into the meeting to receive the examiners' recommendation.
- ii. The communication of outcomes should be sensitive to the fact that the doctoral examination is the most significant culmination of the candidate's work and that the normal in-person or departmental support may not be available to the candidate. It is recommended that Supervisors are available remotely to candidates on the day, and immediately after the viva.

### **5. Viva Chairs**

- i. Viva Chairs should normally be members of senior Sussex Faculty with experience of internal and external doctoral examining.
- ii. Viva Chairs can be from any disciplinary background, department or school, but they must not have previously acted as a named Supervisor of the candidate.
- iii. Viva Chairs must not participate in academic discussion during a viva, or any deliberation regarding the quality of the candidate's work. Their main purpose is to ensure the candidates wellbeing, that the viva process was conducted without

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<sup>5</sup>At the point of writing, an institutional Zoom licence is expected to be announced. For further info on Zoom, please consult the [ITS webpages](#)

disadvantage to any party, and that the viva process and outcome is consistent with Sussex regulations.

- iv. The specific role of Viva Chairs in Distant Vivas is to;
- a. Preside over the viva proceedings in order to ensure the quality of the video/online format does not detract from the examiners' ability to form a decision on the viva outcome, and that the candidate is not disadvantaged by the viva format.
  - b. Confirm that all parties are comfortable with the arrangements and that the candidates and the examiners can see and hear each other clearly.
  - c. If visual links are terminated, to ensure that clear signposting between the parties continues and the candidate is not disadvantaged.
  - d. To consider the wellbeing of all parties, making clear the expectations of likely duration, that candidate and examiners can request brief breaks if necessary, and ensuring that all parties have everything to hand that they require.
  - e. Make the decision about whether the viva continues in the event of a serious or protracted breakdown in the connection.
  - f. Make notes of what was covered during the viva, and if the candidate experienced difficulties in responding, due to the technology/format being used.

In addition, the Viva Chair should:

- g. Verify the candidate's identity, if this cannot be done by the Internal Examiner.
- h. Arrange a test call with all parties separately ahead of the viva.
- i. Collect and hold telephone numbers of all parties (and supervisors) for effective communication in case the viva has to be halted due to technical difficulties.