Guidance for conducting vivas by videoconference during COVID-19 pandemic

**Purpose of this guidance:** PGR students need to be able to use a safe, secure video conferencing system for formal examinations i.e. to undertake their viva voce exam. This guidance has been written in consultation with IT.

**Introduction**

The University is currently encouraging students to continue to make progress with their research degree programme as far as it is possible for, and they are able to do so. A student who is approaching thesis submission and examination should suffer no detriment as a consequence of the closure of the campus and the implementation of social distancing rules. Therefore viva examinations may be undertaken remotely following the principles outlined in section 19 of the Research Degree Regulations (specifically RD 19.6a, d, e, f and g).

Of critical importance is the receipt of signed consent from the student that they consent to a remote viva and the use of reliable and effective technology.

Please note that the University must ensure that quality and standards are maintained; approval from the Chair of Research Degrees Committee (RDC) is required before a remote viva can go ahead. Exam Panel Chairs are therefore asked to submit the proforma in Appendix 1 for consideration by the Chair of RDC.

This guidance has been developed to support you in the conduct of vivas in these extraordinary times.

**Academic Standards**

The notes below provide information on the videoconferencing element of the viva. All other aspects of the viva remain the same. This includes the quality benchmarks for successful pass which must be met.

**Use of Videoconferencing**

The notes below provide information on the videoconferencing element of the viva for you as all other aspects of the viva remain the same, i.e.: the Chair establishing contact with the examiners and the student in advance to discuss which of the OU approved online platforms will work best for all viva participants (please see a Chairs Guide in Appendix 2). Video-conferencing guidance can be found in Appendix 3.

**The basics to enable a remote viva to go ahead are:**

All parties must have both visual and audio capabilities. It is envisaged that there may be instances where either visual or audio connections are interrupted during the viva. If either are completely lost despite attempts to restore them, the viva will need to be paused for a period whilst full connection is re-established, or rescheduled. The viva cannot continue if the quality of either visual or audio connections causes ongoing disruption. In such cases the viva will need to be rescheduled.

**What to do if there are disruptions in the audio and visual quality.**
Where there are minor disruptions, or disruptions that can be easily and quickly overcome, the Chair should make notes of the time they happened, on the Chairs Aide Memoire (Appendix 4) whether they were audio, visual or both and for how long. After each disruption a check should be made that everyone is still willing to continue. If there is continued ongoing disruption to the point the viva is no longer ‘flowing’ or if audio or visual connection is permanent lost, the viva will need to be rescheduled (maybe for later in the same day or to a different day and time). It is for the Chair to formally decide if the quality of the connection is sufficient and acceptable. They should do this with both the examiners and the candidates input. The student must be content that the quality of the technology was acceptable for their viva. If there becomes a point when the student finds the connections are affecting their performance, the viva must be stopped and rescheduled.

Rescheduling a viva.

Where the viva has been stopped and needs to be rescheduled, this can be done at any time that is convenient to all of the participants. It may be that trying later during the same day is acceptable and suitable; or it may be that a new date has to be set. The only limits are availability of all involved and quality of connections. Where possible every effort should be made to complete the process without undue delay.

Information Security

If you have any concerns about information security and want support, please visit the Information Security intranet pages. For urgent queries, please email Information-Security.

The Viva-Voce Examination

Prior to the Viva

Establishing Contact

It is good practice for the Chair to contact each of the examiners and the student by the preferred video method prior to the viva to ensure all arrangements are in place and working. For vivas it is usual practice, provided that the student has agreed\(^1\), to have an observer. Any observer will also need to be involved in the equipment testing and be aware of the date and time of the viva. It is advisable to ask all participants for telephone contact details in case there is disruption during the viva, and you need to contact them.

Refreshments and Breaks

The Chair may wish to remind everyone to pre-arrange any refreshments that they will need during the viva.

Everyone should be made aware that they can request a short break should the need arise.

Student Support

\(^1\) An option for a supervisor to be present, rather than an option against a supervisor being present should be adopted. i.e. this requires a positive request from the student for the supervisor to attend

12.06.20 Graduate School in consultation with IT
The student should be encouraged to have an observer with them to answer any immediate questions after the viva and to provide feedback. They should also be encouraged to have a family member or friend ready for them to make contact with once the process is over. This could be to celebrate with or someone they can talk to if the viva outcome wasn’t what they had hoped for.

The Chair should remind the student, if they do not already know the student and there is no observer present, that they may be asked to show their OU ID at the start of the viva.

Examiner Support

Examiners who have questions about the OU examination process and potential outcomes should be encouraged to contact either the Chair or the Graduate School. For specific questions please contact the management team in the Graduate School.

The Chair should agree with the examiners the procedures for completing the Right to Work checks (see Appendix 5). Examiners will need to show a copy of their passport during the pre viva meeting in order for the Right to Work checks to be completed (otherwise the viva will be unable to proceed).

Pre viva meeting

Additional information about the process of the examination can be shared with the examiners in the pre-viva meeting.

During the Viva

Before the viva starts each person should introduce themselves (this would include any observers). This provides a simple start to proceedings and provides an opportunity to undertake a sound check on microphones. The student may need to show the Chair their OU Pass as confirmation of who they are.

Any observers present should be asked to mute their microphones for the duration of the viva.

At the end of the viva

The student and any other observers must leave the call for the examiners to deliberate. It may be that you completely close the call for a comfort break before the examiners and Chair set up a new call to discuss the outcome.

The student and the observer should be recalled to the meeting and made aware of the recommendation that will be made to the Research Degrees Examination Results Approval Committee.

The Examination Report Form should then be completed by the Examination Panel before being forwarded together with the Pre-Viva Report forms to the Research Degrees Team. These will be forwarded to the Research Degrees Examination Results Approval Committee for consideration.
Wellbeing

It should be taken into account that a viva can be stressful at the best of times. Where students are isolated and do not have the direct support of their supervisors in the same room it is critical that every effort is given to ensure their wellbeing. Chairs and examiners should be mindful to keep an eye on the students welfare and call for breaks to the process if they feel that this would be beneficial to the student.

Students should be encouraged to have someone nearby to offer support and if appropriate the student and supervisor should arrange to talk to one another whilst the panel deliberates the outcome.

In the event of an adverse outcome the Chair should ensure that the student is supported or directed to the support that is available to them.

These may include:

- Discussions with supervisors and/or third part monitors, postgraduate research tutors and Directors of Postgraduate Research/ Affiliated Research Centre Research Degrees Coordinator.

- Accessing the Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) (directly supported students only) or the Big White Wall through the links on the Graduate School Network.

Support

If anyone involved in the examination process requires support or has any question please contact the Research Degrees Team in the Graduate School.
Appendix 1: Request for a remote viva

Proforma to be submitted to the Chair of Research Degree Committee via Graduate School (research-degrees-management@open.ac.uk) a minimum of one week prior to the viva

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationale for requesting a remote viva</th>
<th>COVID19 – related Yes/No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If no please give details:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student has given signed consent to being examined remotely and is aware that they can choose to delay the examination and have a face to face viva without detriment</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student is aware that should they find that the connections are affecting their performance, the viva can be stopped and rescheduled.</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is reliable and effective technology at the locations where the participants are located, and that this is used as the means of conducting the examination remotely;</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contingency arrangements will be made should the technology fail on the day. The backup will be of a comparable standard</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The participants are aware that should the technology fail the examination may have to be rescheduled</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any interruptions issues with videoconference will be noted</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Appendix 2: Quick Check Guide for Chairs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Contacted examiners in advance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked examiners to provide their initial questions for the viva</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacted the student the working day prior to the viva.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary report forms shared between Examination Panel members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The participants has received the video-conference invitations for the viva</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The right to work document has been sent to Graduate School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic versions of Examination Report Form and the Pre-Viva Report forms has been sent to the Graduate School</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any interruptions issues with videoconference have been notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 3: Video-conferencing guides

Joining an Online Microsoft Teams Meeting:

1) In the email/calendar, click on the link to Join Microsoft Teams Meeting:

![Join Microsoft Teams Meeting](image)

2) A web browser window will open, and you will be given the choice to either download the app (worth doing if you are going to use Teams on a regular basis), join on the web or launch the app if you already have it. The web version provides good functionality provided you are using Chrome or Edge (Edge Chromium version for them to be able to share their screen).

![Experience the best of Teams meetings with the desktop app](image)

3) Allow the browser to use your webcam and microphone.
4) Enter your name and toggle the webcam and microphone on/off. You may wish to start the meeting with the microphone muted.
If you have joined the meeting before the organiser has started it; you will receive this message:

5) If the meeting has already begun; you will see this display:

NB: The pink circle (above, showing 'J') will show the initial of the person who organised the meeting.

If the other attendees of the meeting have their webcams enabled, you would see a video of them at this point.
Please note the webcam and microphone icons, hovering over these displays the toggle switch to turn them on/off as desired. It is also possible to share your display, have an Instant Message conversation and see the list of meeting attendees by clicking on the icons on the toolbar. For more options such as live captions click on the …. 

6) If your connection to the MS Teams meeting drops, and you leave, then you can “Re-join”. It is also possible to rejoint from the link in the original email/calendar invitation.

Microsoft have produced a video outlining how to Join a Teams Meeting:
https://support.office.com/en-us/article/join-a-teams-meeting-078e9868-f1aa-4414-8bb9-ee88e9236ee4

Please note at this time The Open University does not use MS Teams for as our telephony platform.

NB: As viva contact is by video call, as opposed to a voice call, the option to dial-in to the meeting using a standard/mobile telephone would not be suitable.

IT has some guides for using Skype for Business [SfB], available on the IT Intranet page. MS Teams has all the functionality of SfB:
https://openuniv.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet-it/Pages/skype-business.aspx
https://openuniv.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet-it/Pages/set-online-meeting.aspx
https://openuniv.sharepoint.com/sites/intranet-it/Pages/join-online-meeting.aspx

Creating and sending an invitation to a MS Teams Video Meeting is relatively straightforward, and can be done using Outlook, or through the MS Teams application itself.

There is a web app for both SfB and MS Teams options, or students should be able to install SfB and MS Teams on personal hardware if they wish. A link is included in the calendar invitations which would be sent out by the OU member of staff when creating the meeting.

Finally, please do remember that there are MS Teams-trained staff in the Graduate School to support you in the use of MS Teams. If you need help please contact the Graduate School.
Joining a meeting in Skype for Business

1. In the email/calendar, find our meeting invitation and open it, to see:

```
Join Skype Meeting

Trouble Joining? Try Skype Web App
```

Join by phone

(UK) English (United Kingdom)
28938# (UK) English (United Kingdom)

Find a local number

Conference ID:
Forgot your dial-in PIN? | Help

2.
3. Use the icons if video drops or you would like to turn on or off

4. If you leave the Skype you can re-join by clicking the link in the calendar invite or click the re-join link.
Appendix 4

Examination Panel Chair
Aide Memoire

N.B. This is an aide memoire, not an official form. It is intended to assist the EPC, but it is not required. If used, it forms part of the EPC’s notes, but it is not normally submitted to the Research Degrees Team.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date of Examination:</td>
<td>/ /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who was present?</td>
<td>Chair:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Preliminary Meeting**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Were preliminary reports received from both examiners in advance of the viva?</th>
<th>Yes □ No □</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were the reports shared with the examiners before the viva?</td>
<td>Yes □ No □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the examiners agree a rough ‘running order’ for the viva?</td>
<td>Yes □ No □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were the examiners broadly in agreement?</td>
<td>Yes □ No □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did the examiners raise any serious issues or concerns?</td>
<td>Yes □ No □</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the observer present (if yes, what was the contribution?)</td>
<td>Yes □ No □</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Examination**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Start time:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was it necessary to make any reasonable adjustments to the examination process (e.g. for a)</td>
<td>Yes □ No □</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### student with special needs? If so please specify.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were the student and examiners introduced?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was it made clear to all present that they could request a break as needed?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note any breaks (time and reason):**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was there a presentation (optional – at the discretion of the examiners)?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Post-Viva Panel Meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were the deliberations undertaken in a fair and appropriate manner?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was the observer invited by the examiners to attend the deliberations?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Time at which the student was called back into the room:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Was it made clear to all present that the examiners’ recommendation is</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>just that, a recommendation, and that it is subject to review by RDRAC?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How was the examination report handled (e.g., prepared on the day, circulated via email after the examination…)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there any additional comments that you would like to raise for the attention of RDRAC?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 5: Right to Work documentation

During the current uncertainty with the COVID 19 outbreak, and having taken advice from the UKVI we can, as a temporary measure follow the “Right to Work” process outlined below in fulfilment of Home Office Requirements.

- Each examiner will be asked to scan a copy of the relevant passport pages or other Home Office approved identification and send them to the Graduate School.
- The Graduate School will let the Chair know which documentation the examiner is using to prove their right to work.
- During video conferencing the Chair will ask the external examiner(s) to state their name and show their passport/ID docs etc so that verification of identify can be made; a screen shot of this would suffice (snipping tool - is a good quick way to do this – please see guidance below).
- The scanned copy must be verified using the following:
  - You must sign and date the copy to confirm original documents have been seen using the endorsement wording below:
  - The Open University Unit Name: ____________________
  - Name of candidate: ____________________
  - Date original documents seen and RTW check conducted: ____________________
  - Certified as a true likeness by: ____________________
  - Signed: ____________________
  - Print name: ____________________

Send as a password protected document (please see below) to the Graduate School.

Provided we can show that we are performing due diligence in this regard UKVI have agreed that this is an acceptable way forward.

If you have any concerns, please contact the Graduate School as soon as possible (this may be prior to or immediately after the viva).
Password protect a document

When sending a file with an Information Security classification of Highly Confidential or above to an external colleague, it is important to encrypt it with WinZip, or password protect it first - even if you are using the Secure File Transfer system (ZendTo). ZendTo only encrypts files during transit and not at rest (i.e. once downloaded, they are no longer encrypted).

Password protect a document in *Word, PowerPoint* or *Excel*

1. Click the **File** tab
2. Click **Info**
3. Click **Protect Document / Presentation / Workbook > Encrypt with Password**

![Password protection options in Word, PowerPoint, or Excel](image-url)
4. In the Encrypt Document box, type a password > Click **OK**

5. In the Confirm Password box, type the password again > Click **OK**

6. Save your file to apply the changes

**Important things to note:**

- Passwords are case-sensitive. Make sure that the CAPS LOCK key is turned off when you enter a password for the first time.
- If you lose or forget a password, Word cannot recover your data.
- You must send the file separately to the password (i.e. not in the same email).
Open Snipping Tool and take a screenshot

1. To open Snipping Tool, select the Start Windows logo Start button button, type \textit{snipping tool}, and then select it in the search results.

2. To choose the type of snip you want, select Mode (or, in older versions of Windows, the arrow next to New), and then choose Free-form, Rectangular, Window, or Full-screen Snip. When making free-form or rectangular snips, use your mouse to select the area that you want to capture.

3. To take a new screenshot using the same mode you used last, select New.

4. Use the Save and Copy buttons at the top of the snip to save or copy it to the clipboard.