Queen's University Belfast

Remote Viva Guidelines

These guidelines have been produced to support independent convenors, examination committee members, students and supervisors in conducting fully remote viva voce examinations (i.e. in other situations it may be that the student or one of the examiners is a remote participant, whereas out of necessity at present all participants join remotely). They have been developed in response to the Covid-19 situation which has prohibited face-to-face conduct of examinations, and may remain in place to facilitate remote viva examinations where students or examiners may be located in another country, or face-to-face gatherings continue to be limited. There may be adaptations to how examinations are conducted through the easing of lockdown restrictions if they are seen to be in the interest of the student.

The guidance is based on practices for remote viva voce examinations remaining in line with University regulations and procedures which apply to in person viva examinations. A viva held remotely should follow the same regulations, procedures and guidelines as an in person viva. These guidelines are intended to provide the participants with additional considerations relevant to a remote environment, but are not exhaustive.

[Download generic guidance from the UK Council for Graduate Education for examiners and students (PDF)](#).

[Study Regulations for Research Degree Programmes (Section 7)](#)

Queen's Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes: [Assessment](#)

Remote viva technologies:

[MS Teams Guidance](#)

IT Support: https://it.qub.ac.uk/sitehelpdesk/user/log.asp

Speak to Information Services if planning to use a technology not supported by the University.

1. In Preparation for the Viva

1.1 Independent Convenor (usually with support from PG Administrator)

As is normal practice at Queen's, each viva examination will have an independent convenor participating. This is a particularly important role in a remote viva, to ensure that the student is comfortable with arrangements, to be alert to their wellbeing throughout the process, and to address technical problems as they arise. The independent convenor has the authority to stop the viva at any point should they deem this necessary for technical reasons, or because they believe the student requires a break.

Further steps to consider include:

- Ensure that the student consents to a fully remote viva voce. They may alternately wish for their viva to be postponed. At this point we cannot determine when face-to-face viva voce examinations may be able to take place.
- Ensure that the external examiner is aware that the viva voce will be held remotely and is set up with 'guest' access to MS Teams. Communications with the examiners and student should reflect that it will be held remotely.
- Ensure all participants are aware of who will be involved in the remote viva and their roles.
- Work with the relevant School administrator to establish the meeting within MS Teams. The student should not be part of the meeting invitation, but be invited by the Chair to join at the appropriate time.
- Ensure that all panel members and student are aware that any files uploaded or comments made in the chat bar are subject to being available for Freedom of Information requests.
- Has contact details for the panel members and the student, and determine if there an alternative mechanism to get in touch if internet is not working (e.g. provide the student with telephone contact details for the independent convenor, if needed during the examination, or another intermediary who can help to get a message to the independent convenor, in case of internet problems).

- Confirm with student if supervisor is to be present, invite supervisor as appropriate
- Date and time for the viva voce meeting should be confirmed via email, using UK time (and being clear about this).

1.2 Examiners

- Complete independent reports in advance of the viva, as is normal practice.
- The internal examiner and external examiner meet remotely before the oral examination (once independent reports have been completed) to discuss how the examination is to be handled.

1.3 Students and their Supervisors

- As is currently recommended in the Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes, students should be offered the opportunity to have a formal mock viva, in this case using remote technology. It is recommended that the principal supervisor meets with the student for approximately one hour to role-play the viva experience, taking on the role of the external examiner, and questioning the student about the thesis and associated research areas, and then providing feedback to the student at the end of the session. The main purpose is to give the student the opportunity to practice their defence, but in a virtual environment also to give the student the opportunity to become familiar with the format of doing a remote viva.
- The student to consider what support would be best to have in place for during and after the viva examination, and discuss this with their supervisor – this may be arranging for someone to be physically present in the same location as the student (obviously not taking any part in the formal examination), or if they can be 'standing by' on the phone or via video.
- Practice on supervisor presence at the viva may vary across Schools, and student can choose if they wish the supervisor to be present at the examination. It is recommended that a member of the supervisory team is on stand-by for the duration of the viva, if the supervisor will not be in attendance. A virtual 'waiting room' is particularly recommended, for the

time when the examiners are discussing the outcome, where the student and supervisor could meet.

- One supervisor may attend the oral examination, with the agreement of the student, and may speak only with the examiners' agreement, to comment on any practical or administrative difficulties in the pursuit of the research raised by the student.

- The student may need to have a discussion with their Disability Officer if reasonable adjustments are normally in place, to determine what is needed for a remote environment.

1.4 Technology Test

This is not a requirement, and may be subject to the level of confidence the student and/or examiners have with a remote examination. A test may be a 'mock' exam held by the supervisor for the student, or may be a session to test the remote viva set up with examiners and studentstudent, if particular concerns for any of the connections. This is to allow participants to practice communicating in this forum, to arrange their technology and venue to be clearly seen, have best possible internet connection, and have a quiet venue that will not be interrupted, as far as possible. The studentstudent can also practice sharing their screen to display anything that they may need to share during the viva voce. Undertaking a practice session was also strongly supported by a recent external examiner, to ensure that the viva itself runs smoothly.

If this takes place with examiner involvement, it is important that during the test that the thesis is not discussed, that video and audio quality is tested between all participants, and that all participants are asked individually if they are satisfied with the set up.

It should be agreed how to handle interactions such as muting microphones when not talking, blurring backgrounds, using the 'raise hand' function, screen sharing; taking comfort breaks etc. A plan needs to be agreed for if the connection is disrupted or not stable (e.g. student having a telephone number to contact the internal convenor or appropriate administrator.

2. Immediately before a Remote Viva

Independent convenor establishes the connection between the examination committee approximately 30 minutes before the start of the exam, so that the examiners can exchange and discuss independent reports. This is already recommended practice, but may be more important in establishing any technology difficulties.

The independent convenor will invite the student (and supervisor, if attending) to join the meeting at the time of the viva.

Ensure that the student and examination committee can hear each other clearly, and see anything that the student writes or draws. The independent convenor will confirm this at the beginning of the exam. If any participant is experiencing difficulties, the viva voce will be postponed.

As with face-to-face vivas, everyone should have a copy of the thesis (electronic or hard copy), access to water, be comfortable in their surroundings and be allowed comfort breaks when needed. It should also be agreed in advance how any of the participants identifies to the independent convenor that they need a comfort break.

3. During the Remote Viva

The independent convenor is responsible for ensuring the smooth running of the viva voce, as is usual practice. In a remote viva, the convenor can also play a supportive role to participants who are juggling technology, which may feel like an additional pressure. A student should not be disadvantaged because of the technology or operation of the viva.

As in a face-to-face viva, it is not a problem to pause – e.g. while considering an examiner's question, while waiting for them to respond or to ask the next question, or to ask them to repeat a question.

It is not recommended that the viva voce is recorded, in line with normal practice for viva voce at Queen's University Belfast.

It is recommended that other participants mute themselves when they are not speaking to the student. The student should not be muted during the exam, but can mute themselves, e.g. if question being asked or there is a disturbance, but should let the panel know that this is the case. There should be no communication between other participants that the student cannot hear. The student and examiners should be able to see and hear each other throughout. During the examination, the independent convenor may wish to turn off their video to save bandwidth, but they must be able to see and hear the student and the examiners (when not self-muted) at all times.

Factors that may need to be considered in a remote / online viva:

- The person speaking may need to pause occasionally so other participants can indicate if they have not heard or have missed something.
- The student may wish to share their screen during the examination to share pre-prepared materials or use Microsoft Whiteboard to demonstrate a specific point in real time. It is recommended that confirmation is sought from the examiners to ensure they can clearly see the shared content and the student, when using this function. [See guidance on screen sharing in MS Teams](#).
- Technology or internet connection issues may be experienced by any participant during the viva. They need to be able to identify if they cannot fully participate (e.g. lost connection). It is the responsibility of the independent convenor to pause proceedings to see if the connection can be regained, and determine a point at which the examination is postponed if it cannot be rectified.

At the end of the examination, the independent convenor will tell the student that they are about to remove the student from the meeting for the examiners to have their discussion, and that the student will be invited to join again shortly.

The independent convenor will remove the student, and supervisor if in attendance, from the discussion, and confirm in the 'people' list that this has been actioned before any discussion commences.

It may be desirable to have a 'waiting room' set up, where the student and a member of their supervisory team could meet while waiting for the examination outcome.

The independent convenor will invite the student (and if appropriate, the student's supervisor) to re-join the meeting and the outcome will be explained to the student. After sharing the outcome, the supervisor and student will then leave the meeting.

QAA report on Supporting the Assessment of postgraduate research students indicates that there is a particular challenge for students who are working remotely, perhaps in isolation, and going through a stressful experience. Convenors, examiners and supervisors should be mindful of the wellbeing of all participants, particularly students, for example as they may be waiting for the examiners' decision alone in their own home. The supervisor could contact a student after the examination to check on their wellbeing. The convenor may wish to contact the supervisor if they have any particular concerns for the student.

As lockdown restrictions begin to lift, it may be possible for a 'blended' approach that recognises the need to support students, for example with the convenor and student meeting face-to-face (with physical distancing), or if the student agreed the supervisor could be present with the student.

4. After the Remote Viva

The independent convenor (supported by administrator) will ensure that the post viva report is provided electronically to the examiner, completed and shared for electronic signatures. The internal examiner and independent convenor should ensure that any ways in which the remote context might have affected the student's performance is recorded.

5. Sources of Support in Preparing for a Viva

Supervisory Team

School PGR Administrators

Graduate School – regular viva preparation sessions, as well as 'Viva Stories' on website

DTP Websites   Vitae

UKCGE, 'Preparing for the Viva: A Guide for Doctoral Candidates'