

Conducting vivas online: guide for candidates

Following a change to the research degree regulations, vivas can be held online under the following conditions:

1. The candidate agrees with the arrangement.
2. The Independent Chair sets up the virtual meeting, ensures any adjustment involving disability is made for the viva and is available throughout the viva e.g. to liaise with participants to resolve any technical problems.
3. The Independent Chair ensures that the viva is recorded and that the recording is made available to the Doctoral School, who will ensure the recording is held securely and only listened to in case of appeal.

It is strongly recommended that the viva is held via MS Teams (with Zoom, for example, there are security concerns regarding who may have access to the recording) and the guidelines below have been written on this basis. Non-Team users should be able to access MS Teams as guests (see below). If there are issues with accessing this system, Skype would be the next best alternative.

Do you have to agree to an online viva?

No, this is your choice:

'During the coronavirus pandemic, after submission and in the run-up to the examination, you should not feel under pressure to accept an online viva if you would prefer not to and if your circumstances (including your sponsor if you are a funded candidate) permit postponing it until the coronavirus crisis is over. Conversely, if you require your viva to take place without delay because you need to move on with your career, it is unacceptable for your university not to make suitable arrangements for the viva to be conducted online. International candidates on Tier 4 visas should bear in mind the potential consequences of postponing their viva, should their visa expiry date be approaching.'¹*

*and/or your sponsor requires a prompt outcome

Please be aware, however, that opting for a face-to-face viva (whilst Pandemic restrictions are still in place) may mean that your viva is delayed for some time and that you may end up having to use different examiners to those originally chosen if an examiner declines a face-to-face viva. We recommend that you discuss your options with your supervisor. If you want the viva to go ahead online:

- By completing of the exam entry form students confirm their agreement to holding a video conference viva.
- You do not have the right to subsequently appeal the outcome of the viva on the basis that the viva has been held remotely.

¹ 'Conducting Vivas Online: A Guide for Institutions and Candidates' – UKCGE, p.6

Who will organise the online viva?

Your supervisor is responsible for scheduling a date and time for the viva.

The **Independent Chair** is then responsible for the following:

- Sending out the MS Teams meeting invites
- Arranging a test viva so that you can practise using MS Teams and feel comfortable with its functionality
- Allowing guests, including you, into the meeting on the day of the viva
- Ensuring that all participants have time before the viva starts to feel comfortable with using the technology
- Starting the recording at the beginning of the viva and stopping it once you leave the viva and before the examiners confer on the outcome
- Liaising with all participants if there are connection issues during the viva
- Ensuring that the viva is carried out in line with College regulations and policy

Why is the online viva recorded?

It is a regulatory requirement of the College that all vivas are recorded and in the presence of an Independent Chair. This recording will only be listened to in the event of an appeal. No attempt should be made by any parties to retrieve, capture or share a recording of the viva at the time of or following the viva.

In preparation for the viva you should:

- Arrange for a friend or family member to be on 'stand by' (on the phone or via video conferencing if it's not possible in person) outside the room where you are to be examined so that you are not alone at the end of the viva.
- Read general advice about vivas. You may find it useful to refer to the [UKCGE \(UK Council for Graduate Education\)'s 'Guidance on Preparing for the Viva'](#)

On the day of the viva

- Join the MS Teams meeting:
 - When you click 'join meeting' on your invite it will open up MS Teams in your browser suggesting that you download the app. Ignore this and click the button that says 'Join on the Web instead'.
 - When you join the MS Teams meeting, you will wait in the 'lobby' until the Independent Chair lets you in.
- The Independent Chair should allow you and the examiners plenty of time before the viva is scheduled to begin for everyone to log in and to confirm they are comfortable with operating the technology
- Before the viva starts:
 - Be prepared to show the examiners that you are in a room by yourself
 - If neither the Independent Chair nor the internal examiner know you, you must be prepared show the examiners and Independent Chair some official ID (e.g. passport / driving licence / EU ID card) to prove your identity
- During the viva:
 - If you need a break, alert your Independent Chair
 - If there is a problem with the connection, it should be possible to restore it after a short break. It is very unlikely but if the issue were to persist / it is not possible to restore the connection, it may be decided that the best course of action would be to reschedule the viva. You can then elect to reschedule a face to face viva
- After the viva:
 - Make sure you have someone with you (either virtually or in person):
'It is important, irrespective of the outcome, that the candidate is not alone following the viva. For most this will be a time for celebrating the successful culmination of their studies (even remotely), but for others, the outcome will be less pleasing than they were expecting...'¹²

Top tips from the UKCGE (UK Council for Graduate Education)

The UKCGE in its [Conducting Vivas Online: A Guide for Institutions and Candidates'](#) document has gathered some useful practical advice from those who have experienced online vivas³:

- *'While using technology could present practical challenges, if everyone involved in the viva is patient, keeps calm and approaches it with good humour, the technology itself shouldn't add to the stress, although it might mean the process takes slightly longer.*
- *As in face to face vivas, it is not a problem to pause: 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 if you haven't understood*

- *Be aware of the possibility of speech distortion and the need for the person speaking to pause occasionally so other participants can indicate if they haven't heard, or have missed something*
- *As in a face to face viva, you shouldn't be afraid to ask questions, for clarification, or for something to be repeated.*
- *Keep your desk clear and only have in front of you things you will need during the viva, such as a copy of your thesis and some writing materials, as well as enough water to last you through the exam.*
- *It is also important you won't be interrupted during the viva (have your phone on silent mode while ensuring you can see who is calling) and that your environment is as quiet as possible.*
- *The most important thing is that you should feel as comfortable as possible during the viva: there is no need to dress differently from normal unless a different style will make you feel more relaxed, or more formal, whichever suits you.*
- *Finally, try to enjoy your viva – focus on your work and the examiners' questions and put in place some celebratory arrangements at the end, even if they are remote.'*

² *Conducting Vivas Online: A Guide for Institutions and Candidates' – UKCGE, p.5 /*

³ *Conducting Vivas Online: A Guide for Institutions and Candidates' – UKCGE, p.7*