Conducting vivas online: guide for departments

In light of the current Covid-19 pandemic, vivas can be held online under the following conditions:

1. The candidate agrees in writing with the arrangement.
2. The candidate’s supervisor or an 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. The exception to this is if the student has specifically indicated on their exam entry form that they do not wish their supervisor to observe the viva, in which case this role will need to be delegated to an alternative academic member in the department or to an Independent Chair.
3. The supervisor / 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. With Skype the supervisor needs to send the recording to the Doctoral School but must remember to delete it from Skype after doing so. Further advice on online video conferencing can be found here.

Agreement to online viva arrangement

It is important that all parties involved in the viva agree in writing that they are happy for it to go ahead online and equally that all agree to an indefinite delay to a face to face viva. The Doctoral School needs a copy of this agreement.

Candidate:

- When a candidate submits their thesis, the Doctoral School will advise them that the option to have the viva online is open to them and advise them to discuss this with their supervisor if they have not already done so already. It is worth noting that no-one knows when the pandemic will be over so a face to face viva may be months or even over a year away.
- The fact that a viva is held online is not valid grounds for appeal if the candidate is not satisfied with the viva outcome.
- When the supervisor informs the Doctoral School of the date / time of the viva, they should also forward the candidate’s written agreement to this arrangement.

Examiners:

- Examiner invitations sent after Easter will include a section about online vivas during the Covid-19 pandemic, so examiners will be agreeing to this format as part of their acceptance of the invitation to examine.
- If examiners have been invited before Easter, the Doctoral School will liaise with the supervisor to obtain a copy of the examiners’ written agreement to this arrangement.
At least a fortnight before the viva

At least a fortnight before the viva, the supervisor or Independent Chair

- informs the Doctoral School of the date / time of the viva
- forwards the candidate’s written agreement to this arrangement to the Doctoral School
- sets up an MS Teams meeting and sends out the invites to all participants – see below
- makes sure the candidate has an opportunity to practise with the technology so that they feel comfortable using it (e.g. by holding a mock viva)

### Setting up an MS Teams meeting and inviting guests

**Option A:** (if you don’t have the Teams Meeting icon in your Outlook calendar):

- Type the url: mail.rhul.ac.uk
- Log in as normal
- Go the Calendar
- Click the block to show the day / time you want to create the meeting and create a meeting as in Option A
- Click ‘More options’ (bottom right corner)
- Half way down on the right, you should see a ‘Add online meeting’ drop down
- Click on ‘Teams, meeting’ and the MS Teams link for that meeting is added to the meeting request – see below:

  ![Join Microsoft Teams Meeting](https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/teams)

**Option B:** (if you do have the Teams Meeting icon in your Outlook calendar):

- Go to your Outlook calendar and create the meeting
- Add the candidate and examiners’ email addresses to the ‘To’ box. For those external to Royal Holloway, just type their full email address
- Click on the Teams Meeting icon on the toolbar of the home tab
- This creates the meeting link.

### What if the examiners are non-Team users?

Non-Teams users will be able to join meetings via the browser version of Teams. When they click ‘join meeting’ on their invite it will open up Teams in their browser suggesting they download the app. They can ignore this and click the button that says ‘Join on the Web instead’.

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**On the day of the viva**
Before the viva

- The supervisor or Independent Chair will need to allow guests (i.e. the candidate, the external examiner and the internal examiner if they are not from Royal Holloway) in to the meeting. A notification will let them know that someone is waiting to join and they should be able to give them permission to join via this notification.
- Just as with face to face vivas, the examiners should be given some time before the viva to discuss their initial thoughts on the thesis, decide on who will ask which questions etc. They should have received a copy of the other examiner’s preliminary report from the Doctoral School (they are sent out once the Doctoral School has received each examiner’s report).
- The supervisor should:
  - ensure that the participants are able to contact each other by phone if a technical problem should arise
  - allow 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 e.g. make sure that the participants are aware of the Share option on the toolbar, which allows them to share a section of the thesis that they wish to focus on:
    - ensure that all participants know that if they need a break during the viva, they may take one
  - brief everyone at the start about how they will be interacting.

Examiners also have the challenge of making questions clear to the candidate when they aren’t in a room together.\(^1\)
- The candidate should:
  - show on the camera that they are in a room on their own
  - If possible have a friend or family member ‘standing by’ to be with them at the end of the viva (virtually if there is no-one else in their household); it’s important that the candidate is not alone following the viva.
  - If they have requested that their supervisor is not present at the viva and neither the supervisor’s replacement nor the internal examiner know the candidate, the candidate must show the examiners some official ID (e.g. passport / driving licence / EU ID card).

During the viva

- Once everyone is ready, the supervisor starts the recording and the viva commences.

Recording of the viva

The College regulations state that all vivas must be recorded. The supervisor is responsible for starting the recording:

- Click on the three dots (more actions)
- Click on ‘Start recording’
- You will see a message at the top of the screen

The supervisor / Independent Chair should have their microphone on mute. The supervisor should not participate in the viva beyond starting / stopping the viva recording and liaising with the participants if there are any connection issues.

\(^1\) ‘Conducting Vivas Online: A Guide for Institutions and Candidates’ – UKCGE, p.4
- If there are connection issues:
If any of the connections break down during the viva but can be restored after a short break, the viva should continue. If any of the connections break down during the viva but cannot be restored after a short break, participants will be asked to come to an agreement as to whether the viva should be cancelled and a new viva date set (e.g. if this happens near the beginning of the viva, rescheduling would be the most appropriate course of action but this may not be considered necessary if it were to happen near the end of the viva).

- At the end of the viva, before the examiners confer over the outcome, the supervisor stops the recording and both the supervisor and the candidate leave the meeting.

After the viva

- Make sure there is someone with the candidate (virtually if not possible 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’
- The recording of the viva should be transferred over to the Doctoral School – see below.

Transferring the recording to the Doctoral School

Option A:
The Doctoral School will ask IT to permit all supervisors with candidates with upcoming online vivas to have permission to have the recording saved in Microsoft Stream. Only the supervisor (i.e. the owner of the meeting) can transfer the recording to the Doctoral School. This should be done straight after the viva.

- Go to the Chat section of the meeting and you will see the recording saved
- Click on the three dots (more actions) and click on ‘Open in Microsoft Stream’
- Click on ‘Discover’ on the top toolbar and then ‘Videos’
- Find the viva recording and click on the pencil icon on the right hand side:
- In the Permissions section in the middle, under ‘Share with’, click on ‘People’ and then search for both Alex Borrett and Nisha Patel. Their names should now appear in the list of people who can currently access the recording.
- Make them both owners by clicking the box and then ‘Apply’
- The Doctoral School can now remove permissions so that only they can access the recording. The recording will only be listened to in the event of an appeal.

Option B:
- If there has been a problem with the permissions and the recording does not upload to Microsoft Stream, you will receive a message to this effect in the Chat channel, next to the recording.
- To share this recording with the Doctoral School, please add Alex Borrett and Nisha Patel as participants of the meeting. The Doctoral School can then download the recording from the Chat channel. This will be saved securely and will only be listened to in the event of an appeal.