

Guidance on the appointment and role of the Independent Chair

It is a regulatory requirement that all vivas are conducted in the presence of an Independent Chair and that all vivas are recorded.

Criteria for the appointment of an Independent Chair

1. The Independent Chair will normally be a member of Royal Holloway academic staff, but not the Head of School, and will usually be from the candidate's school. They can be emeritus though this role is not a paid role.
2. The Independent Chair will not be a member of the candidate's supervisory team (including advisor) and will not have played any significant part in the project or the assessment.
3. The Independent Chair will have had experience of supervising Research Degree students through to completion. This experience may be gained outside of Royal Holloway.
4. It is expected that the Independent Chair will normally have had experience of conducting at least two* Research Degree viva voce examinations as an examiner.
5. The Independent Chair will be familiar with the Royal Holloway Research Degree examining process, procedures and regulations.

* The current regulations stipulate at least three but the Directors of PGR Education have agreed a blanket suspension of regulations to allow two as an appropriate minimum

Nomination process

- The Independent Chair should be nominated:
 - via the [exam entry form](#) at the same time as the examiners, where practicable, in line with the criteria listed above. When considering whom to nominate, please bear in mind:
 - that the Independent Chair role requires the academic to be able to deal with potentially difficult circumstances with confidence, clarity and firmness.
 - where the examiners are both of opposite gender to the candidate, a chair of the same gender to the candidate should be considered.
 - ethnic /racial / religious sensitivity should be exercised where appropriate
- Check with your PGR Department Lead or Director of PGR Education if there is a department or School pool of Independent Chairs to be nominated in rotation.
- The nomination will be subject to Director of PGR Education's approval. Once approved, the Doctoral School will officially invite the Independent Chair to chair the examination.

Role and responsibilities of the Independent Chair

- The role of an Independent Chair is to:
 - oversee the oral examination to ensure that the examination is conducted fairly and in accordance with Royal Holloway Research Degree Regulations.
 - ensure that the conduct of the viva provides the candidate with an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and to explain/defend their work.
 - where necessary, help mediate between the examiners to identify possible recommendations and facilitate an agreed outcome, but not to provide any academic assessment.
- The Independent Chair is not required to have any detailed knowledge of the thesis and is not involved with the examiners' assessment of the candidate, beyond advising them of the outcome options available to them in the Research Degree regulations.
- The Chair is required to attend the meeting with the examiners prior to the oral examination and be present for the duration of the oral examination and post-viva discussions.

Prior to the viva date

Prior to the viva, the Doctoral School will send the Independent Chair:

- a link to the [Research Degree regulations](#) and [Guidance on the conduct of the MPhil/PhD Exam](#)
 - details of any reasonable adjustments to be made to the conduct of the examination under the provisions of the [Regulations on Access Arrangements for Assessment](#)
 - an electronic copy of the candidate's thesis for information purposes only. The Chair is not expected to have read the thesis but may find it useful to read the abstract.
 - a copy of both preliminary reports. On the rare occasions that the Doctoral School has not received both preliminary reports in time, the Independent Chair will be asked to check in the pre-meeting that the missing preliminary report has been written and the examiners have shared their reports.
 - an 'Independent Chair report' form, which is to be completed at the end of the viva to indicate that the viva has been conducted satisfactorily.
 - If the viva is being held face to face, links to:
 - [Examiners guide to audio recording vivas](#)
 - [Dictaphone instructions for the recording of vivas](#)
 - If the viva is being held online, links to:
 - [Conducting vivas online – guide for academic staff](#)
 - [Conducting vivas online – guide for candidates](#)
 - [Conducting vivas online- guide for examiners](#)
 - If the candidate has opted for a viva via video conference, the Independent Chair will be responsible for the set up and smooth running of the viva. This includes:
 - offering a quick MS Teams meeting with any of the participants who are concerned about using the MS Teams connection so that they feel comfortable with the technology
 - setting up a pre-meeting on MS Teams for the examiners to agree on the agenda for the viva
 - setting up the main viva meeting on MS Teams for the candidate and examiners – and supervisor, if they are attending as an observer
- See [conducting vivas online – guide for academic staff](#) for full details.

The role of the Independent Chair at the viva

The Independent Chair should:

1. attend the pre-viva meeting with the examiners and assist the examiners in setting an agenda for the viva
2. at the beginning of the viva:
 - introduce the examiners and candidate and outline the format of the examination to the candidate and its key purpose
 - explain that the role of the Chair is to ensure that the assessment processes are operated rigorously, fairly, reliably and consistently and to provide advice on regulations, procedures, policy and practice.
 - Explain that the Chair has a neutral role in the assessment process and takes no part in the actual assessment of the research.
3. ensure that the viva is recorded
4. ensure that the examination is conducted fairly and in accordance with the College's regulations and policy, including for example:
 - all main items on the agenda are addressed and that the candidate is given the opportunity to respond to all questions asked by the examiners
 - each of the examiners has a proper opportunity to contribute to the examination processExceptionally, the Independent Chair may adjourn/suspend the viva where they have concerns about its conduct.
5. intervene if it is felt that the candidate would benefit from a break, for example if:
 - the viva lasts for more than two hours
 - the student becomes unwell or distressed
6. ensure that if the supervisor is present:
 - they only act as an observer and agree to maintain confidentiality in respect of the content of the examination. The supervisor will not participate in the examination of the student unless invited to contribute by the examiners.
 - they are asked to withdraw before the candidate in order to provide the candidate with an opportunity to say anything to the examiners that they would prefer to say without the supervisor being present
7. at the end of the questioning period, asking whether both examiners are satisfied that they have enough information to come to an examination decision regarding the candidate. If they agree, then the Independent Chair should ask the student whether they have any points they would like to raise.
8. ensure that the candidate (and supervisor, if applicable) is asked to withdraw from the meeting before the examiners begin their final deliberations
9. attend the post-viva discussion and facilitate discussion if need be to assist examiners to reach a decision and to advise the examiners on any procedural matters (e.g. outcomes available to them) as necessary. The Independent Chair should play no role in the actual academic assessment.
10. once the examiners have deliberated, ensure that the actions required of the candidate and the examiners are clear and understood by all parties e.g. that the examiners must return their viva outcome report to the Doctoral School within two weeks of the viva.

After the viva

At the end of the end of the viva, the Independent Chair should send the completed 'Independent Chair Report' form to the Doctoral School to indicate whether or not that they are satisfied that the viva has been conducted in accordance with the College's regulations and policy.

If the viva was held online, the Independent Chair should check that the Doctoral School is able to access the viva recording.