

# THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF INDEPENDENT CHAIRS AT *VIVA VOCE* EXAMINATIONS OF RESEARCH DEGREES

1. The appointment of a non-examining Independent Chair (from here on, 'Chair') for a research degree (PGR) *viva voce* examination must be approved either by the Doctoral College Quality Sub-Committee or, in exceptional cases of urgency, the Director of the Doctoral College on its behalf.

The need to appoint a Chair should be exceptional, rather than the norm, for examination teams.

If a Chair has not been appointed, the roles and responsibilities described in point 7 below should be undertaken by the Internal Examiner.

2. A non-examining Independent Chair must be appointed to the examination team in the following circumstances:
  - the student being examined is also a member of academic or research staff at the University;
  - the internal examiner has no PGR examining experience at the University of Plymouth;
  - the examination team as a whole does not have experience in a total of three U.K. examinations at the level of the examination;
  - the *viva voce* examination is being conducted via video-conference;
  - 'reasonable adjustments' have been made or disability has been taken into account in *viva voce* examination arrangements or conduct;
  - the thesis is collaboratively co-authored by two students being examined together;
  - issue(s) have been raised by either the internal or external examiner(s) in their pre-*viva* reports – and, in particular, if both examiners have ticked the box on the RDC.4P (or RDC.4PR in the case of a resubmission) form indicating that they believe the thesis to be seriously flawed and not on target to merit consideration for the degree to be awarded;
  - the student has requested a Chair due to issues related to equality and diversity (All students must be asked if they would like a Chair of their gender appointed if both their examiners are a different gender to their own, although they are free to decline this offer.)

Please note: under no circumstances may a candidate have two examiners and a Chair of a different gender to their own (e.g. a female-identifying candidate with two male examiners and a male chair).

A Director of Studies may also propose a Chair (including on behalf of the student or one of the examiners) when one is not required.

It is strongly recommended that a Chair is appointed in cases where a second oral examination is required for a resubmitted thesis. If relevant and possible, this should be the same person who chaired the candidate's first *viva voce* examination.

3. The principal duty of the Chair is to ensure that the examination is conducted fairly and professionally, and in accordance with University regulations.

It is therefore important that Chairs: are University of Plymouth staff members; have examined at least two degrees at the level of the examination; have examined at least one postgraduate research degree at the University; and are familiar with the University's regulations, guidelines and procedures. They are expected to have attended an Internal Examiners' or Chairs' Briefing session or refresher run by the University within the 3 year period prior to the oral examination.

Chairs are not examiners of the thesis and do not determine the outcome of the examination. However, they are likely to facilitate the examiners in making their decision together.

4. Prior to the oral examination, the Chair will be provided with:

- a. a letter of appointment,
- b. notes of Guidance for Examiners of Research Degrees,
- c. copies of the pre-*viva* reports (RDC.4P/4PR forms) from both examiners, which must be submitted 10 working days prior to the oral examination,
- d. a copy of the thesis. It is recommended that they read the abstract and scan the thesis for familiarity and to note any gross irregularities,
- e. details of 'reasonable adjustments' made to the form or content of the oral examination,
- f. a copy of the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications Award Descriptor for Masters and Doctorates. These descriptors should act as an aide memoire by which the examiners determine whether the candidate satisfies, or not, the U.K. criteria for the degree, and
- g. a 'Chair's Feedback' form, which must be completed following the oral examination and returned to the Doctoral College.

5. 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.

When the thesis includes practice elements, it is desirable that the Chair is in attendance with the examiners.

6. At the pre-*viva* meeting, Chairs must ensure that both examiners understand the Chair's role in the examining process and explain why they have been appointed (see point 2 above).

Please note that, prior to the *viva voce* examination, students should not be told why the Chair has been appointed, except when this was due to gender balance at the student's request.

7. Chairs must ensure that the University's regulations and 'Notes of Guidance for Examiners of Research Degrees' are followed. In relation to these, and ensuring that good practice is adhered to, the Chair is normally responsible for the following:
  - 7.1. Ensuring that during the pre-*viva* meeting, the examiners develop an agenda or plan of questioning for the oral examination that takes into account their pre-*viva* report forms (RDC.4P/4PR);
  - 7.2. When the thesis includes the assessment of live practice, screenings or an exhibition, ensuring that the examiners provide no formative feedback to the candidate prior to the *viva voce* examination;
  - 7.3. Setting up the room for the *viva voce* examination and seeking an alternative venue if the room assigned is unsuitable;
  - 7.4. Ensuring that, if the candidate's supervisor attends the *viva voce* examination, the supervisor is not part of the examination process. The Chair may ask the supervisor to leave the room if they intervene inappropriately in the examination process. Supervisors can only contribute during the examination with the permission of the Chair after consultation with the examiners.
  - 7.5. Knowing how to contact the supervisor, if not present at the *viva voce* examination, or their nominee (phone extension, or mobile phone number), in case they are required;
  - 7.6. Welcoming the candidate into the examination room; introducing everybody; explaining the Chair's role in the process (as per point 3 above); making sure that the candidate is ready to start and is comfortable;
  - 7.7. Giving the candidate an opportunity to relax into the *viva voce* examination at the start. It is appropriate for the Chair to ask an initial introductory question (e.g. 'what did you really enjoy about your project?', 'what made you want to do this research?') before handing over to the examiners;
  - 7.8. Offering a 5-10 minute break to the examiners and candidate, approximately 90 minutes into the *viva voce* examination, if it is likely to go much beyond this;
  - 7.9. Taking notes of the progress of the *viva voce* examination with a time line noted in the margin. These notes may be used in the case of a complaint or appeal.

It is expected that that the Chair takes notes by hand, so as not to disturb the candidate or examiners with the sound of a typing on a keyboard.
  - 7.10. Intervening if they judge that an examiner's questioning is too aggressive, or may be biased or discriminatory. If necessary, the Chair has the right to call a temporary break to discuss these concerns with the examiners.
  - 7.11. If the candidate is showing signs of extreme stress, suspending the *viva voce* examination and allowing the candidate a short break to compose themselves. In very extreme cases, the Chair has the right to suspend the *viva voce* examination indefinitely; in such a case, the Doctoral College must be informed immediately and the Chair referred to the Director of the Doctoral College for advice of how to proceed. If the latter is not available, then the Chair should use their judgement on how to proceed until advice can be sought.

- 7.12.** 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 Chair should ask the student whether they have any points they would like to raise.

It is the Chair who then normally asks the candidate (and supervisor) to leave the room to allow the examiners to confer and come to a decision.

- 7.13.** During the period of conferring, bringing objectiveness to the discussion, by reflecting back on particular relevant issues that occurred in the *viva voce* examination. In the case of a 'borderline' student, the Chair may use their experience to suggest to the examiners how they felt the candidate had performed in the *viva voce* examination (e.g. using phraseology such as average, above average, below average).

The Chair should go through the questions and prompts on the RDC.4 (or RDC.4R) one by one. If the examiners are not in agreement, the Chair should help them to come to a decision through discussion. The Chair should also discuss each of the options for the result of the examination with the examiners, helping them to rule out options one by one, based on QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications Award Descriptors.

In the case of all decisions which require further work by the student (either corrections or that the thesis is referred for resubmission), the Chair must ensure that the examiners agree what needs to be done by the student; the extent of the further work; how the written list of corrections (or guidelines of what is required for a resubmitted thesis) will be produced; and which examiner(s) will consider corrections.

- 7.14.** Calling the candidate and their supervisor back into the examination room in order to deliver the verdict of the examination. Where this involves corrections or the thesis is referred for resubmission, this must include a summary of what the student needs to do next, the process and timescale. The Chair may explain these if agreed in advance by both examiners.

- 7.15.** Ensuring that all members of the examining team, including the Chair, sign the examiners' joint report form RDC.4 (or RDC.4R if examining a resubmitted thesis) before leaving the examination room. It is appropriate for the Chair to complete the body of the form, should the Internal Examiner agree.

The Chair must emphasise that a formal written identification of the corrections required (or notes for guidance if the thesis is referred for resubmission) must be submitted to the Doctoral College as soon after the end of the *viva voce* examination as possible (normally within a day or two and definitely within a two-week period from the date of the examination).

- 7.16.** When agreed with the examiners, corresponding with them following the oral examination about the precise form and content of the formal written version of the corrections (or notes for guidance if the thesis is referred for resubmission), and possibly sending the final agreed version to the Doctoral College.

8. After the oral examination, the Chair is required to sign the examiners' joint report (RDC.4 or RDC.4R) and ensure that it is returned to the Doctoral College as soon as possible.

Together with the 'Chair's Feedback' Form, they must also submit their notes taken during the *viva* and/or a brief report (using 'Chair's Feedback' form) to the Doctoral College. This is very important in the case of a thesis that has been referred for resubmission or the award of a degree different to which the thesis was submitted for, as the student has the right to appeal against this decision and the University has a duty to provide evidence on the conduct of the examination.

Reviewed June 2008, November 2012, October 2014 and October 2017