



Guidelines for PGR remote *viva voce* examinations due to COVID-19 pandemic

While the principles and regulations for *viva voce* examinations remain unaltered, the University has enabled the submission and examination of PGR theses in alternative digital/online forms (see [‘Advice for Postgraduate Research Students about the Coronavirus Outbreak’](#)) until further notice. This document describes these changes, operational processes and offers practice guidelines where appropriate. It supersedes any COVID-19 guidelines for PGRs previously published or circulated by the University.

Please read this document in conjunction with the [Research Degrees Handbook](#) 2019 (which embeds ‘Notes of Guidance for Examiners’ [pp 77-92] and ‘The Role and Responsibilities of Independent Chairs [pp 93-97]), Professional Doctorate handbooks (if relevant), as well as the ‘Flowchart for PGR remote *viva voces* due to COVID-19 pandemic’ (Appendix 1 of this document).

Should a candidate’s **Director of Studies (DoS)** be ill or otherwise unable to fulfil their responsibilities related to *vivas* and examinations, these can be done by a 2nd or 3rd supervisor instead. Please email the Doctoral College for further guidance, if required.

The Doctoral College email address is doctoralcollege@plymouth.ac.uk

Conditions that must be met for a remote *viva*

1. Remote *vivas* may be challenging for a number of reasons (for instance, time lags, lack of direct eye contact, lack of in person support for candidates). Neither the candidate nor the examiners are obliged to accept holding a remote *viva*; however, it is not currently possible to advise when face-to-face *vivas* may resume.
2. The scheduled *viva voce* must always be postponed in the case of the ill health of the candidate or the examiners, and may also be postponed due to the ill health of a family member. All participants must agree to reschedule the *viva* at the earliest convenient opportunity and the Doctoral College informed immediately if the *viva* is postponed.
3. All participants must confirm to the **Director of Studies** that they have the resources (including the bandwidth) to hold the *viva* remotely with no anticipated disruption.

Appointment of examination team (including Chair)

4. It is the responsibility of the **Director of Studies** to nominate the examination team via GradBook.
 - a. This should take place at least 4 months before the student is due to submit their thesis.
 - b. Full details can be found in the [Research Degrees Handbook](#) (pp. 58-62).

5. As per University regulations, all remote (i.e. video conferenced) *vivas* require a non-examining **Chair**.
 - a. If an examination team is being nominated for a *viva* that is intended or extremely likely to take place remotely, the DoS should nominate a Chair on the RDC3 form.
 - b. Chairs must fulfil the eligibility requirements outlined in the [Research Degrees Handbook](#) (p. 61) – that is, they must have completed at least 2 PGR examinations at same level or above, including 1 at the University of Plymouth, as well as examiner/Chair training run by the Doctoral College since Sept 2018. Also, a candidate cannot have 2 examiners and a Chair of a different gender to their own, even with their approval.
 - c. If the examiners have been approved but a Chair has not already been appointed via the RDC3 process, this will have to happen as soon as possible. DoSs may propose a Chair EITHER to the [Director or the relevant Deputy Director of the Doctoral College](#), who will confirm approval by email (that is, there is no need to go through the usual RDC3 resubmission process to add a Chair). When emailing the Director or Deputy Director for approval, please also copy in researchskills@plymouth.ac.uk (asking to confirm that the proposed Chair has completed their training requirement) and the Doctoral College (asking to confirm that the Chair has completed requisite examinations at the same level or above). Following approval, the Doctoral College will send an appointment letter, information and forms to be completed to the Chair.
 - d. It is possible to approve a Chair on the condition that they complete the requisite refresher training prior to the *viva*. This can be done by watching a video and completing a multiple-choice quiz on Moodle.
6. All **External Examiners** must have the right to work in the UK, even if they are located elsewhere for the *viva*. External Examiners need to email an image or scan of their passports (or a link to one) to the Doctoral College at least 4 working days prior to the scheduled *viva voce* and show their passport to the Chair during the pre-*viva* meeting online.
7. Examination teams have not been formally appointed until the Doctoral College sends appointment letters to all members, copied to the Director of Studies.

Submission of thesis & distribution to examination team

8. The University is enabling the electronic submission of theses until further notice.
 - a. The preferred method for doing this is for the **candidate** to share their thesis from their UoP OneDrive with doctoralcollege@plymouth.ac.uk, with the subject line 'Thesis submission – NAME and STUDENT NUMBER'.
 - b. If this is not possible, the candidate may send a pdf of their thesis by email (if under 8MB) or use a transfer service (e.g. We Transfer), again with the subject line 'Thesis submission – NAME and STUDENT NUMBER'.
 - c. A completed [RDC.3S](#) form must be submitted by the candidate at the same time as their thesis.
 - d. The Doctoral College will then send copies of the thesis to the appointed members of the examination team with instructions, guidelines and forms to be completed.
9. If the candidate has already submitted hard copies of the thesis with a completed RDC.3S form to the Doctoral College, but these were either not sent to the examination team prior to the closure of

the campus or else were not received by the examiners, then the DoS should request a pdf of the thesis from the candidate.

- a. The candidate must confirm in writing to their DoS that the pdf is exactly the same as the previously submitted hard copies of the thesis.
- b. The DoS should then email the pdf of the thesis to each member of the examination team, copied to the Doctoral College with the student's confirmation above.
- c. The DoS must also request that the Doctoral College sends members of the examination team any instructions, guidelines and forms to be completed, if hard copies of the thesis were not sent to the examiners or else not received.
- d. Please note that candidates should not be in direct contact with their examiners.

10. If the examiners have received copies of the thesis (electronic or hard copies) and a Chair has subsequently been appointed for the remote *viva*, the DoS should request a pdf of the thesis from the candidate and forward it to the Chair. The DoS should confirm this to the Doctoral College.

11. It is recognised that it may not be possible for some theses (or elements of theses) to be submitted electronically – in particular, those that include artistic or creative outcomes.

- a. If a thesis includes artistic practice (e.g. a performance, artefact or exhibition), the candidate and Director of Studies should explore whether alternative presentations are possible, with the DoS consulting with the examiners as necessary. Examiners are encouraged to be flexible about such contingent arrangements and to take into account restrictive circumstances.
- b. Whenever possible, the written element of the thesis should still be submitted electronically as above. However, if it is not possible to submit an electronic version of the written element of the thesis (for example, because it is presented in an alternative format such as an artist's book), candidates should contact the Doctoral College for further advice. It may be necessary to wait to submit their thesis until further notice; they will not be charged extension fees.

Organisation of *viva voce* examination

12. It remains the responsibility of the **Director of Studies** to organise the time and date of the *viva voce*, subject to the availability of all participants. This cannot be finalised until after the thesis has been sent to the examiners by the Doctoral College.

13. The *viva* may be scheduled to take place between 4 weeks and 3 months of the thesis being sent to the examiners by the Doctoral College (although this may be extended due to illness).

14. The **DoS** should confer with the Doctoral College and Disability Services should 'reasonable adjustments' be required by the candidate in the case of a remote *viva*.

15. Remote *vivas* do not require the approval of the Director of the Doctoral College until further notice (this is an exemption to University Regulations). However, the Doctoral College needs to be informed by the **DoS** of the time and date, as for any *viva* (as well as if it has been postponed due to illness, etc).

16. Zoom (video conferencing app) is the University's preferred platform for remote *vivas* (although others are also acceptable). Zoom is available to all University staff members and generic guidance is available on [this page](#) (see in particular, 'Interactive Small Group sessions'), which also links to videos, etc. Tips to keep the Zoom session secure are available [here](#).
17. The Zoom meeting for the *viva* should be set up by either the Internal Examiner or the Chair (to agree between them). This is to enable the recording of the *viva* if necessary (see below).
18. Examiners must not communicate with the Director of Studies or candidate about the quality or content of the thesis prior to the *viva voce*. Examiners may only discuss the quality or content of the thesis together *after* they have both submitted their independent pre-*viva* reports ([RDC.4P or RDC.4PR](#)) to the Doctoral College.
19. In the case of a resubmitted thesis, the examiners may choose to waive the *viva* after each has submitted their pre-*viva* reports ([RDC.4PR](#)). See the Research Degrees Handbook (p. 89) for details and process.
20. The Doctoral College will [reimburse costs of travel and accommodation](#) already incurred by External Examiners in organising their attendance at a face-to-face *viva voce* examination if not used.

The pre-*viva* meeting

21. The pre-*viva* meeting is attended by the examination team only (that is, the **examiners** and the **Chair**).
 - a. This is when the examiners meet to discuss the thesis and to agree on the order and line of questioning/discussion at the *viva*.
 - b. It is also an opportunity to test the video conferencing platform, to ensure that it operates smoothly and that the examiners understand its functionality.
 - c. Pre-*viva* meetings normally last 30 – 60 minutes.
 - d. It is recommended that the pre-*viva* meeting is set up separately from the *viva* examination itself on Zoom (or other video conferencing platform) by either the Internal Examiner or Chair.
 - e. Neither the DoS nor the Doctoral College needs to be informed in advance of the pre-*viva* meeting.
 - f. The Chair is expected to take notes of what is agreed; the pre-*viva* meeting should not be audio or video recorded.
22. The pre-*viva* meeting cannot take place until the examiners' independent pre-*viva* reports ([RDC.4P/PR](#)) have been sent to the Doctoral College. The Doctoral College will exchange them between the examiners and send copies to the Chair when they have both been received.
23. For face-to-face *vivas*, the pre-*viva* meeting usually takes place immediately before the *viva voce* examination itself. However, examination teams may choose to organise this earlier (for example, the day before) if this is more convenient for a remote *viva*.
24. During the pre-*viva* meeting, the **External Examiner** needs to hold their passport photo page to the camera so that the Chair is able to confirm (to the Doctoral College which will confirm to HR) that it

has been seen. This is in addition to the scan/image of the passport that has already been sent to the Doctoral College.

The *viva voce* examination

25. The *viva voce* examination is attended by the **candidate, examiners, Chair and (only if requested by candidate – see below) the DoS or another supervisor.**
 - a. A PhD *viva* normally lasts between 90 minutes and 3 hours; a ResM *viva* usually lasts 60-90 minutes. Participants should always be offered comfort breaks after 90 minutes (and may request one at any time).
 - b. At the end of the questioning/discussion period, the candidate must be offered the opportunity to raise any matters they feel might have impacted on their performance – for example, the remote format of the *viva*, the COVID-19 pandemic, and/or any other personal or supervisory issues during the preparation of their thesis.

26. The Doctoral College will postpone any scheduled *viva* if either the pre-*viva* reports ([RDC.4P/PR](#)) or the scan/image of the **External Examiner's** passport has not been received at least 4 working days prior to the scheduled *viva voce*.

27. The **Chair** of the *viva* may choose to record it instead of or in addition to taking notes; this may be delegated to the Internal Examiner only. Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams all allow for recording of group calls.
 - a. This is to help mitigate any issues arising as a result of the unusual circumstances.
 - b. The Chair must ensure everyone is aware if a recording is taking place.
 - c. The recording must not be circulated to anyone (including the other members of the examination team, candidate or their supervisor), with the exception of the Doctoral College (see below).
 - d. The recording should be kept until the completion/award of the degree and then deleted. If the storage is not possible (e.g. because the Chair or Internal Examiner leaves the institution), please contact the Doctoral College to organise storage.

28. The **Director of Studies** or one other supervisor may attend the *viva*, on the request of the candidate only.
 - a. This needs to be noted on the [RDC.4 or RDC.4R](#) form.
 - b. Normal guidance must be followed (e.g. DoS is unable to speak unless explicitly addressed by examiners or Chair and they should not be seen by the candidate; i.e. their microphone and video camera should be switched off and they should not communicate to the candidate via chat functions).
 - c. If the DoS/supervisor does not attend the *viva* itself in this way, it is convention that they attend the Informal outcome meeting (see below). They should also be available either by phone/email/video during and after the *viva* to offer the student any support required, and in order to answer any questions from the examination team if necessary.

29. Here are some **tips for both examiners and candidates**, from those who have successfully participated in remote *vivas*:
 - a. Test and practise with the technology and platform in advance so you understand what it can and can't do. Don't wait until the last minute to sign in or join the meeting. If you are

having tech issues, make sure you tell another participant by email/phone etc (preferably the Chair) so that everybody is aware.

- b. Some people have recommended using an ethernet cable for a more stable connection (rather than Wifi).
- c. Using headphones/headset may make it easier to hear conversations clearly.
- d. Mute when you're not speaking to minimise background noise (especially if you are typing on a keyboard while listening).
- e. Try to choose a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Close the door to the room if possible. Make sure you have water available.
- f. Take some time at the start of the *viva* to establish a rapport. Discuss issues that may go wrong due to the technology and how you plan to deal with it together.
- g. Establish a mechanism for when somebody wants to speak or intervene, so that participants don't simply talk over each other. Try to leave time after a comment or question for a response without being tempted to 'fill up' silence.
- h. Make sure everybody can see you clearly and that your head is fully in shot. Sit with your back to a wall rather than a window, if possible.
- i. Set a plain background using Zoom, if you think your real life background might be distracting (or you don't want to share it).
- j. Think about your body language and potential difficulties in picking up non-verbal cues. Try to look at the camera as much as possible.
- k. Refer explicitly and clearly to page numbers (and figure headings, etc) in the thesis. Wait for everybody to look for these references and to catch up (remember that examiners will likely be looking for these on a pdf/screen).
- l. Remote *vivas* often lend themselves to more of a 'question and answer' format. Examiners should try to engender discussion as much as possible.
- m. The same common courtesies apply online as they would in person. Don't forget to greet and say goodbye as normal. Be patient and understanding when things go wrong.
- n. You might also find the UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) 'Conducting Vivas Online: A Guide for Institutions & Candidates' useful. It can be downloaded [here](#).

30. Before winding up the *viva*, the candidate (and, if relevant, Director of Studies/supervisor) must be told when the 'Informal outcome meeting' (see below) will take place, or how they will be contacted to join this meeting. Normally, this will be done by the Chair. Note also that, exceptionally, the examiners may choose to speak privately with either the candidate or DoS/supervisor prior to making a decision (see Research Degrees Handbook, p. 65).

Chairing the *viva*

31. The main purpose of a **Chair** for remote *vivas* is to enable the candidate and examiners to concentrate on the content and discussion, rather than the form and format.
 - a. As per the 'Roles and responsibilities of Independent Chairs' document ([Research Degrees Handbook](#), pp. 93-97), the Chair is also responsible for ensuring that the *viva* is run fairly and professionally, and that the candidate is not placed under undue stress or disadvantaged by the form of the *viva*.
 - b. In the case of Internal Examiners who have not examined at the University of Plymouth before, Chairs support and advise them in relation to regulations, expectations, examination outcomes and processes, and paperwork.

- c. In the case of staff candidates who are being examined by two External Examiners, Chairs are responsible for the meeting of University regulations, expectations and paperwork.
 - d. As noted above and in the Research Degrees Handbook, Chairs are responsible for: setting up the pre-*viva* meeting, *viva voce* examination and Informal Outcome meeting on Zoom or similar (can be delegated to Internal Examiner); formally introducing and concluding the *viva voce* and Informal Outcome meeting; confirming to the Doctoral College that they have seen the External Examiner's passport during the pre-*viva* meeting; taking notes during the pre-*viva* meeting; taking notes and/or recording the *viva voce*.
32. Chairs should be appraised (normally by the Doctoral College) of any 'reasonable adjustments' required and ensure that they are fulfilled with sensitivity.
33. The Chair should have contact details (e.g. phone, email, WhatsApp) for the examiners, candidate and Director of Studies/supervisor, in case the technology fails, in order to call the candidate and DoS to the post-*viva* meeting, etc. The Internal Examiner should also have contact details for the Chair.
34. The Chair is delegated to stop a *viva* in progress and to postpone/reschedule if they believe its form, technology or situation is proving not to be in the best interest of the candidate or hindering their performance.
- a. The Doctoral College must be informed at the earliest opportunity if this happens; advice, if necessary, will be available from either the [Director or a Deputy Director of the Doctoral College](#) about how to proceed.
 - b. At the start of the *viva*, the Chair must explain to the candidate the circumstances (above) in which they may stop the *viva*; this should be captured on a recording or in their notes.

Post-*viva* meeting

35. This meeting is attended by the **examination team only** (the examiners and Chair). It normally takes place immediately following the *viva voce* examination or else after a short break. It could therefore be a continuation of the *viva voce* examination on Zoom (after the candidate and DoS/supervisor, if relevant, have logged out) or could be set up as a separate meeting.
36. The purpose of this meeting is to determine the outcome of the examination, on the basis of the thesis and *viva voce*. See 'Notes of Guidance for Examiners' ([Research Degrees Handbook](#), pp. 82-86) and 'Roles and Responsibilities of Independent Chairs' ([Research Degrees Handbook](#), p. 96).
37. During this meeting, the Chair should note both the outcome and the reasons for it, in addition to corrections or additional research required in general terms.
- a. These will be fed back to the candidate during the Informal outcome meeting that follows and then formalized via the submission of the [RDC.4/4R form](#) and list of corrections/report to the Doctoral College within 2 weeks.
 - b. It is recommended that the RDC.4 form is completed during the post-*viva* meeting.

Informal outcome meeting

38. This meeting is attended by the **examination team, the candidate and, usually, the Director of Studies** or other supervisor. It normally takes place immediately following the post-*viva* meeting or else after a short break. It could therefore be a continuation of the post-*viva* meeting – with the candidate and DoS being contacted by the Chair to rejoin – or else it could be set up as a separate meeting at a fixed time later in the day.
39. The purpose of this meeting is to informally share the examination outcome with the candidate and DoS and, if relevant, any corrections or additional research that is required, and the process that will be followed.
- a. The candidate is encouraged to ask for any further information or clarification that they require.
 - b. It should be remembered that the formal outcome notification and final list of corrections/requirements will be sent to the candidate by the Doctoral College by email.
40. It is appropriate to hold a virtual celebration of the candidate's achievements following the notification of the outcome, to take time to 'network' and discuss ways forward for the candidate's research (e.g. publication etc.) where appropriate. Alternatively, if the outcome is not what was desired, it is important that the Chair and DoS ensure that the candidate is supported during and following this meeting.
41. Should the examiners not agree on the examination outcome, the Chair may decide not to hold an Informal outcome meeting with the examiners present; they may, instead, inform the candidate and their DoS the situation and what will happen next by either video or phone call.

After the examination

42. Please see:
- a. **Examiners** – 'Notes of Guidance for Examiners' ([Research Degrees Handbook](#), pp. 84-92)
 - b. **Chairs** – 'Role and responsibilities of Independent Chairs' ([Research Degrees Handbook](#), p. 97)
 - c. **Candidates** – 'Examination outcomes and award of your degree' ([Research Degrees Handbook](#), pp. 36-41)
 - d. **Supervisors** – 'Following the *viva voce* examination' ([Research Degrees Handbook](#), p. 65)
43. In the case of the [RDC.4 or RDC.4R](#) forms for remote *vivas*, physical signatures are not required; however, this form must come from the email account of either the Chair or Internal Examiner, CCed to all members of the examination team, and all other signatories need to email the Doctoral College to confirm their agreement with the contents of the form.
44. Should the candidate require additional time to complete their corrections, they may request an extension of up to an additional 3 months without penalty. Under normal circumstances, the Doctoral College would ask approval of the examiners; however, this requirement is currently being waived. The Doctoral College will confirm revised due dates for corrections with the examination team when a request has been approved.

Appendix 1:

Flowchart for PGR remote *viva voces* due to COVID-19 pandemic

