



Graduate Board

Progression and Examinations Group

Policy and guidance for online research degree transfer and final examinations

The policy and guidance in this document apply to both the transfer and the final viva. The guidance can also be applied to an Annual Progress Review meeting. The process for identifying and agreeing support and reasonable adjustments for PGR assessments, including those for a video-streamed viva, is set out in a [separate document](#).

University policy on arrangements for the transfer viva/final examination

1. To allow flexibility to explore the most appropriate format, as needed for academic or other reasons, there are three possible models for a research degree transfer or final viva:
 - Fully in person (all parties together on campus for a face-to-face viva)
 - Fully remote (all parties complete the viva via Microsoft Teams or Zoom)
 - Hybrid (some parties are in person whilst others are online).
2. A transfer viva/oral examination conducted using video streaming should be comparable to those used for a face-to-face oral examination. Due consideration should be given to the environment in which the parties are located, that this is fit for the purposes of an oral examination and that it is in all other ways comparable to those used for face-to-face examination.
3. Irrespective of the format of the viva, it must be confirmed that pastoral support (normally via the supervisor or other appropriate member of staff, who might be available via video streaming or telephone) will be available to the PGR immediately after the viva, should this be necessary. Further guidance on this can be found in the Instructions to Examiners or Transfer Panel Guidance.
4. For a fully online or hybrid viva, appropriate consideration must be given to time zones.
5. The assessors/examiners must be able to discuss in private during the pre and post-viva meetings

6. A video streamed viva may be carried out via a platform which is supported by IT. [Microsoft Teams](#) and [Zoom](#) are the current permitted platforms¹.
7. All cameras must be on. Telephone vivas are not permitted.
8. Recording of the viva by any party is not permitted.
9. Having to continually interrupt the oral examination to refresh the connection can disrupt the flow of the oral examination and disadvantage the candidate. If there are any doubts about the connection and whether it will last the duration of the assessment/examination the examination cannot go ahead and must be rescheduled.
10. All parties must have access to, and be comfortable with the use of, the appropriate technology. Video streaming should not be used in any cases where any party (including the PGR) is not comfortable with the arrangements or the technology. The use of video streaming should not form grounds for a subsequent appeal and if there are any doubts or concerns the viva must be postponed and a face-to-face viva arranged at a later date.
11. If the PGR is a remote party, they must be alone and undisturbed during the examination. The transfer panel/examiners will be required to verify this at the start of the viva and must be satisfied that the PGR is alone and that the environment is appropriate.
12. In all cases the integrity of the transfer/examination process must be paramount to ensure the examination is conducted fairly and robustly, in accordance with University policy. The Graduate Board must be satisfied of the fairness and consistency of the process, that this will be conducted appropriately according to expected standards, and that the PGR will not be placed at a disadvantage.
13. All postgraduate researchers are expected to maintain high standards of academic conduct in a University examination. If the examiners have any concerns about any possible academic malpractice or breach of this policy during an online viva it must be reported to the Director of PGR Studies and to the Doctoral College Progression and Examinations team for investigation. It is at the examiners' discretion whether to immediately halt the viva pending investigation or to continue the viva.
14. The University reserves the right to require that a viva be postponed and an in-person viva rearranged at a later date if it is not satisfied with any arrangements, the conduct of the examination, or in the case of technical difficulties on the day.

[End of policy. Guidance overleaf]

¹ Please consult the IT knowledge base articles for further advice. [Microsoft Teams](#) / [Zoom](#)

Guidance

Agreeing the format of the viva

1. The internal examiner is responsible for making the arrangements for the final oral examination following receipt of the thesis and must contact the external examiner, the PGR and the Independent Chair (if appointed) to arrange a date, time and location (or online platform) for the examination. The arrangements for a transfer viva will vary, and advice should be sought from the relevant Graduate School.
2. For a final viva, it is sensible for the PGR and Supervisor(s) to start to consider the format of the viva at the point of examination entry and as part of the selection of examiners. The preference of the PGR should be central to decisions about the format of their viva, but it must be recognised that there may be a need to manage expectations for example where an international external examiner is being nominated which may mean an in-person viva is not practical due to cost or distance of travel. In such cases some compromises would have to be expected over the choice of external examiner or the format of the viva.
3. The format of the final/transfer viva can be agreed on a case by case basis, considering the circumstances and preferences of participants. When taking decisions on the format of a viva, due consideration should be given to:
 - The preference of the PGR about the format of their viva.
 - The circumstances/location of each party, where the cost or distance of travel may mean an in-person viva is not practical, desirable or sustainable.
 - Any support arrangements or reasonable adjustments which have been agreed for PGRs and/or Examiners/Panel Members, and which might require a particular format. The process for identifying and agreeing support and reasonable adjustments for PGR assessments, including those for a video-streamed viva, is set out in a [separate document](#).
 - Any particular IT equipment or software that might need to be accessible to support discussions
4. The agreed format of the final viva should be confirmed by the internal examiner using the GRAD viva scheduling workflow. The Transfer Panel are asked to note the format of the viva in the transfer workflow.
5. In the unlikely event of a disagreement on the format of the viva the details should be forwarded to the Director of PGR Studies in the first instance. If the Director of PGR Studies is not able to resolve matters, they should refer this to the Head of the Faculty Graduate School for adjudication. If the Head of Graduate School is not able to resolve matters locally, the details should be forward to the Doctoral College Progression and Examination Team who will refer the matter to the Progression and Examinations Group.

Requirements and Guidance for a fully online or hybrid viva

Before an online viva

6. An Independent Chair may be requested by the Examining or Transfer Panel team for a fully online or hybrid viva.²
7. For a final viva, the internal examiner must confirm that pastoral support (normally via the supervisor or other appropriate member of staff, who might be available via video streaming or telephone) will be available to the PGR immediately after the viva, should this be necessary. A Supervisor is expected to be in attendance for a transfer viva, and should therefore be available to provide immediate post-viva support if needed.
8. Both transfer and final vivas are expected to take place – and wherever possible conclude – in Office hours, irrespective of the format of the viva as this is when staff are available to provide advice and support to examiners and PGRs, should this be needed. Due consideration should be given to this when planning the start time of the viva to ensure sufficient time is available. Careful consideration should be given to time zones for an online or hybrid viva, where there may be a need to consider two, sometimes three, time zones for a remote viva with an overseas participant/s.
9. Examiners and Panels should avoid arranging a viva for the last day before a University closed period (Christmas and Easter), when there will be an extended period post-viva where advice and pastoral support may not be available. Wherever possible, examiners and Panels should avoid arranging a viva for a Friday afternoon.
10. The Examiners/Panel may wish to consider a thorough testing of the connection must be conducted before the oral examination. This should include both a ‘trial run’ a few days before the oral examination and immediate, prior testing of the connection on the day.
11. Consideration should be given to the location of the remote attendees, and that their environment is suitable for a University examination. This may include an appropriate Office Space/Meeting room at their place of work, a partner Institution or, if at home, then a space where attendees are confident they will be undisturbed.

At the start of an online viva

12. Allow a period of time at the start of the viva for all parties to become familiar with the environment.

² Examiners will be advised that an Independent Chair can be appointed on request for an online viva. Where the examiners request that a Chair is in place to oversee the online viva, a Chair must be appointed.

13. Agree at the start what will happen if someone's connection drops out and you need to pause the viva until connection has been resumed (e.g. alternative means of contact (email, telephone) in the event this is needed to discuss arrangements). If such communication problems continue and are severely disruptive, the examiners and chair should discuss with the PGR whether to postpone the viva. The PGR should be informed of this at the start of the viva.
14. Inform the PGR at the start that they must stop the examiners – or ask for a question to be repeated – if they find any issues with sound/video quality.
15. Careful consideration should be given to the use of breaks for an online meeting. Reassure all parties at the start that they can request a break as and when needed and/or agree at the start some pre-arranged break times for the benefit of all parties (without interrupting the flow of the viva).

During an online viva

16. All parties should have access to a copy of the thesis. This may be an electronic version of the thesis open on the computer so that each party can show their respective screens, or access to a printed copy of the thesis (if this has been arranged). This may be helpful in conversations about which equation, diagram, etc is being referred to.
17. If audio and/or visual communication is lost with one or more of the parties during the viva the viva should be paused until communication is re-established. If such communication problems continue and are severely disruptive, the transfer panel/examiners should discuss with the PGR whether to postpone and rearrange the viva.
18. The viva is a University examination and as such must represent a rigorous and secure assessment. It is considered highly unlikely that there might be misconduct in a viva, but examiners are expected to be alert to this possibility. For example, if the PGR appears to be consulting with a third party or using reference material or other sources of information (other than the thesis or transfer report)³. If concerns arise, the examiners may wish to seek assurance that the candidate is alone. If the examiners have any concerns about the integrity of the examination, these should be reported to the DPGR and the Doctoral College Progression and Examination Team. If concerns arise at an early stage and cannot be resolved, the examiners should postpone the viva pending investigation. If concerns arise close to the end of the viva, or seem to be resolved, the examiners might choose to complete the viva and come to a provisional recommendation pending any post-viva investigation.

³All parties should have access to a copy of the thesis/transfer report. PGRs may consult their copy of the thesis/transfer report (which may be annotated with notes/post-it notes) during the examination if it helps them.

At the end of an online viva

19. The Internal Examiner (or Independent Chair if appointed) should check with the PGR at the end of the viva whether they were happy with how it was conducted from a practical point of view and if there is anything they would like noted.

Post- viva support where the PGR is a remote participant

20. It must be recognised that some PGRs will be disappointed by the outcome of their examination, and may be upset on receiving the examiners' feedback. Please consult the Instructions to Examiners or the Transfer Panel Guidance for detailed advice on the post-viva support arrangements, if needed.

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