Advice and guidance for virtual viva voce examinations for staff and postgraduate researchers at the University of Huddersfield

The normal expectation is that the viva (oral) examination will take place at the University with all appointed examiners being present with the candidate. In exceptional circumstances, the viva may need to take place using video conferencing software. Currently, due to government restrictions during the current COVID-19 pandemic, all viva examinations are taking place virtually.

It is important that appropriate arrangements should be made to maintain the **integrity**, **confidentiality** and **validity** of the examination process.

Changing to a virtual viva is understandably difficult for those who were expecting to take part in a face-to-face examination. However, this guidance aims to ensure that the process is as seamless as possible.

Before the viva

Virtual viva examinations may only be held by video conferencing, subject to the approval of all participants. As well as personal computers, tablets and smart phones can also be used.

Mock vivas can be very useful and postgraduate researchers (PGRs) are encouraged to discuss arranging a virtual mock viva with their supervisor.

A **test call** in advance of the viva to ensure that all parties have the technology required to take part in the virtual viva. This may be organised by either the internal examiner or School admin staff.

All parties should have access to, and technical support for, the **appropriate technology** (software and hardware) and be comfortable with its use. This should include testing the stability of the internet connection. Participants should also confirm that suitable video conferencing facilities (or other technology) will be available for sufficient time for the examination to take place.

Contingency plans should be made in case of technical difficulties (e.g. you may plan to use Microsoft Teams, but also test Skype). There must be prior agreement between all parties as to the procedure in the event of a **technical failure** for reconvening the examination. It is useful to obtain telephone numbers of all parties so contact can be made, should this happen. Where a change of format is required, the candidate should be given sufficient notice and an opportunity to become familiar with the technology before the viva.

Any **time differences** between the two locations must have been taken into account to ensure that the candidate is not disadvantaged by an examination taking place at

an inappropriate time and bearing in mind the availability of the videoconferencing facilities at each end.

If the internal and external examiners are at separate locations, they must take account of their need to consult privately with each other on the **conduct of the examination**. This includes how the pre-viva discussion will be conducted; the form and sequence of questions; who should take the lead at various stages of the viva; what graphics, and document viewing facilities, etc. might be required. These issues should be addressed in their preliminary reports.

All participants should ensure that their device can remain connected to a **power supply** throughout the examination. It may help to inform candidates that vivas usually last longer than two hours, and may take much longer, so they should not rely on their device's battery.

To optimise video conferencing software, all participants should ensure they have nothing else running on their device, and if possible ensure that no one else in the household is using any bandwidth for the duration of the viva e.g. streaming video or online gaming, as this may slow down the connection.

All participants should ensure they are in an appropriate room where they will not be interrupted.

The internal examiner may be asked to verify the right to work status of the external examiner(s), if this is the case you will be informed by admin staff in your School.

Using Microsoft Teams

The University's preferred video conferencing software is Microsoft Teams. The internal examiner should **host** the Teams meeting, and may co-host with the independent chair where one has been appointed. The Teams invite may be organised by either the internal examiner or School Admin Staff. They are also responsible for setting up the test calls at a mutually convenient time for everyone involved including the student prior to the viva.

When scheduling a meeting, the internal examiner should that 'only me' is selected against the 'who can bypass the lobby' option. This will allow the internal examiner to control participants' entry into the meeting. This is an especially useful function for pre-viva discussions; once discussions have been concluded you can allow the candidate entry to the meeting.

To optimise Teams, ensure you have nothing else running on your device. Ensure that no one else in your household is using any bandwidth for the duration of the viva e.g. watching YouTube, online movies etc. If possible, politely ask that they do not use broadband for approximately 3 hours as a viva is taking place. You can also use

Teams on your phone. Once again the key is not to use anything else that uses bandwidth on your phone, so switch off apps and notifications on the phone.

Note: If working remotely, you will need to use Teams from your device's desktop rather than using UniDesktop or the VPN.

During the viva

Virtual vivas can be more tiring than face-to-face, and the host should be aware that they may miss non-verbal cues and should therefore check more frequently whether participants (examiners and/or the candidate) require a short **break.** It is good practice at the beginning of the viva, after welcoming the participants, for the host to state that there will be a 10 minute break after every 45 or 60 minutes.

Examinations **must not be recorded**, from either within video conferencing software or via other devices/applications.

The **video cameras** must be arranged such that all parties (i.e. examiners, the candidate, and independent chair) should be able to see the other party/parties present at all times. If the supervisor is joining the meeting, their audio should be muted and their camera turned off, so they play no part in the examination. The meeting chat (all participants) may be used to facilitate sorting technical issues only. Private chats should be disabled.

If the candidate brings **materials** to the viva in addition to their copy of the thesis, these should be identified to the examiners using the camera at the start of the viva. The University will not normally permit any person to be present with the candidate other than for technical support to ensure that their equipment is working.

In the event of any **failure with the technology** before or during the viva, or other concerns regarding the conduct of the viva by video conference, it is the responsibility of the internal examiner, or independent chair if one is present, to suspend the examination and to decide whether it is possible for the examination to continue or whether the viva should be rescheduled.

After the viva

All participants should be asked to confirm at the conclusion of the viva that the holding of the examination by video conferencing had no substantive bearing on the examination process. Any issues should be recorded on the post viva examination paperwork by the internal examiner or in the independent chair's report if one has been present.

The host should ask the candidate to leave the meeting while the examiners consider the outcome. The candidate should then be called back into the meeting

and told informally what the recommendation to the University will be. The supervisor may accompany them, even if they did not attend the viva.

Having agreed to a virtual viva, the candidate will not be permitted to use this as grounds for appeal, unless the circumstances of technical failure or other unforeseen eventualities beyond the control of the examiners were deemed to have adversely affected the candidate's performance.

Further resources and guidance

Please refer to the University's Guidance to staff on the implications of remote working in relation to Data Protection and Freedom of Information. Note in particular:

> *Any [meeting] transcript downloaded to personal devices would be subject to FOIA and DPA as outlined above. You should therefore not download a transcript of online meetings; the official record of a meeting should always be stored on the appropriate University record-keeping system.*

The UK Council for Graduate Education (UKCGE) has published a range of guidance on their website regarding conducting vivas online and the perspectives of candidates who have experienced a remote viva.

The Researcher Environment page on Bright Space has been updated with resources from Viva Survivor workshops, including discussions of virtual vivas.

Specific guidance on the use of Microsoft Teams can be found on Microsoft's website, iPark and via our Digital Skills and Training Team.