

CONDUCTING VIVAS ONLINE

A Guide for **Institutions** and **Candidates**



UK Council for
Graduate Education

GUIDANCE FOR DOCTORATE-AWARDING INSTITUTIONS ON CONDUCTING VIVAS REMOTELY

Overview – Online Vivas & Covid-19

The UK Council for Graduate Education is issuing this guidance to assist institutions who, in the light of Covid-19, are rapidly adapting to making online vivas available to larger numbers of candidates who by necessity cannot attend a face to face assessment with examiners.

The advice below is based on existing effective practice we have identified, already taking place in some of our member institutions, and also includes some of our own experience. Please ask your viva chairs, examiners and supervisors to read *both the institutional and candidate guidance* (see below) before any candidate they are examining or supervising experiences an online viva. The usual guidance to participants for the conduct of vivas should still apply (e.g. the need to ensure candidates are put at their ease at the beginning of the viva, that examiners should assure themselves the work is that of the candidate, and making any previously known reasonable adjustments required for individuals). In this document we have added to the usual institutional requirements to accommodate the online situation.

Importantly, following submission of their thesis (or equivalent), during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is the candidate's right to choose the format of their examination. If they are uncomfortable with having an online viva and if their circumstances allow it, they should be permitted to wait until the coronavirus crisis has passed so that a 'normal' viva can take place. Conversely, if they need to complete their degree without delay, it is unreasonable not to offer them an online viva as an alternative.

Arrangements may need to be agreed with the sponsors (e.g. research council, charitable trust) of externally funded candidates. It is important to advise international candidates on Tier 4 visas appropriately, making them aware of the potential consequences of postponing their viva, should their visa expiry date be approaching.

The guidance assumes the participation of an independent chair of the viva, a practice not currently adopted in all UK institutions. The chair's role is particularly important in online vivas, however, to ensure the candidate is not disadvantaged and to resolve any technical problems. They also have the authority to stop the viva at any point should they deem this necessary for technical reasons or because they believe the candidate requires a break.

Technology

Using technology to conduct vivas, while it is extremely helpful in situations such as we are all experiencing, does present some challenges for all concerned. None of these is insurmountable as long as everyone remains calm and remembers the importance of the viva for the candidate.

Some institutions may make use of software that enables the viva to be recorded. If you plan to use this facility, all participants should have given permission in advance. Others may decide that the viva chair can maintain an adequate record of the proceedings and that this may be less intrusive to participants.

It is the institution's responsibility to ensure that all participants can access the software chosen to conduct the viva and have sufficient time to practice so that they can become familiar with the technology before the viva takes place. The software will need to accommodate all the anticipated needs of the examination and should include video, so that all participants can see one another. The chair and also the supervisors, if present, should be asked to keep their microphone on mute setting, although the chair may need to un-mute from time to time to ensure the process runs smoothly, or to intervene if problems arise.

Some software enables participants to be placed in a virtual waiting room, where the candidate and any observers of the viva such as supervisors, may be asked to wait briefly before the viva begins, and at the end while the examiners are discussing the outcome.

Prior testing should include checking that the link will last for the anticipated duration of the viva, bearing in mind that the proceedings are likely to take a little longer to allow for delays and any technical hitches.

If necessary, do offer in advance individual tutorials for examiners and candidates and ensure that all participants are comfortable with the process and aware of how the technology is likely to affect the viva.

Process

Online vivas taking place as a result of the coronavirus outbreak will of necessity be different from situations where the candidate is the only remote participant (often the case in other circumstances). All participants will be joining the viva remotely and therefore it is important to give everyone an opportunity to communicate in a way that is easiest for them and most similar to how the viva would normally take place. Some universities may decide that, to be sure the correct individuals are present, participants will be asked to show their university ID at the start of the process.

In advance

Encourage the examiners to contact one another before the exam and if possible to exchange written reports. They should be allotted some time before the viva to discuss their initial impressions of the report, to agree upon the questions they wish to ask the candidate, and to decide on how to manage the exam, including who will ask which questions and similar.

It is less easy to be spontaneous when conducting vivas online; nonetheless the examiners need to agree with the viva chair how to intervene when and if a new question occurs to them. Following their online meeting, it is helpful for the examiners to have a brief discussion with the viva chair about how they wish to proceed, before the exam begins and the candidate joins the meeting.

Have technological help available for all throughout, so that any glitches can be resolved. The person responsible for technology can, for example, be responsible for asking everyone to mute themselves at the start, then make their microphone live while they are speaking.

Ensure that participants may contact one another by phone should a problem arise.

Allow plenty of time before the viva is scheduled to begin for everyone to log in and confirm they are comfortable, with their surroundings and with operating the technology. Ensure that all participants know that if they need a break during the viva, they may take one, by making a request to the chair.

Brief everyone at the start about how they will be interacting. All viva participants are nervous, especially the candidate, and a remote event concerning juggling technology as well as answering examiners' questions, is more than usually challenging. Examiners also have the challenge of making questions clear to the candidate when they aren't in a room together. Please see the penultimate paragraph in the guidance for candidates below for additional information.

Check if the candidate has someone to support them during the viva (a 'buddy'), preferably an academic, but if not, a friend or family member, preferably someone who has experienced a viva. Obviously this person should take no part in the formal examination, but would be there to provide moral support in the way supervisors would. In a coronavirus pandemic, this person may not be able to be present with the candidate; instead they may have a friend or family member 'standing by' on the phone or via video conferencing. The buddy may be one of the candidate's supervisors, if the institution allows, in which case opportunities should be provided for the candidate to communicate privately with them.

In every case, ensure the candidate has had as much support as possible from the institution in advance, including a mock viva held remotely, so they will have had an opportunity to experience the process using technology.

Check that all participants have access to drinking water and anything else they may need.

During the viva and at the end

As in a face-to-face situation, candidates may bring with them to the viva any materials that will help them respond to examiners' questions, in addition to the obvious objects such as their thesis and writing materials so they can take notes if they wish.

Everyone should introduce themselves at the beginning, in the same way as they would in a face to face viva.

Online, vivas should be chaired by an experienced academic (for example someone from the candidate's department but not the internal examiner), who can manage participants' interactions. Make sure that person is fully aware of the role and understands they are there to facilitate communication between the participants, especially to assure the wellbeing of the candidate. As is usual with independent chairs of vivas, they should take no part in the exam. In the online situation, the chair should look carefully for any distress the candidate might be experiencing and if necessary be able to have a private conversation

with them to resolve the problem. This may mean going off-line for a short time then returning to negotiate a short break in proceedings.

The institution's normal regulations about the presence of supervisors should also apply to remote vivas. For example, with the candidate's permission, in many universities supervisors are permitted to attend the viva but only to observe, not take an active role. It may be particularly reassuring for candidates to see their supervisors are present.

Develop a procedure for the end of the viva that mirrors the normal procedure where the candidate leaves the room while the examiners have a discussion, then returns to hear the outcome. It is important, irrespective of the outcome, that the candidate is not alone following the viva. For most this will be a time for celebrating the successful culmination of their studies (even remotely), but for others, the outcome will be less pleasing than they were expecting, for example, the examiners may recommend major rather than minor corrections (still a pass!).

In the current situation try to establish that the candidate will have a friend or family member 'standing by' on the phone or using other media at the end of the viva, if there is no-one else in their household.

Before everyone logs off, the chair is responsible for congratulating the candidate, and importantly, ensuring that all participants know exactly what will happen next, including the timescale for the candidate to receive the examiners' report.

GUIDANCE FOR DOCTORAL CANDIDATES EXPERIENCING ONLINE VIVAS

We have developed the following guidance for candidates, knowing that the doctoral examination is 'high stakes' and that you will be nervous about it, even before having to deal with the added pressure of meeting the examiners remotely.

First, please read the guidelines for institutions above, to check that arrangements for your own viva take account of the effective practice set out. If, having done that, you are concerned there might be any 'gaps' in the preparatory arrangements, contact your supervisors as soon as possible. It is your university's responsibility, not yours, to make arrangements for your online viva, so there should be no pressure on you to take the initiative.

During the coronavirus pandemic, after submission and in the run-up to the examination, you should not feel under pressure to accept an online viva if you would prefer not to and if your circumstances (including your sponsor if you are a funded candidate) permit postponing it until the coronavirus crisis is over. Conversely, if you require your viva to take place without delay because you need to move on with your career, it is unacceptable for your university not to make suitable arrangements for the viva to be conducted online. International candidates on Tier 4 visas should bear in mind the potential consequences of postponing their viva, should their visa expiry date be approaching.

On the UKCGE website you will find some slides and text used by two colleagues in a UK university to help candidates prepare for their vivas. The advice given there is also relevant to online vivas and may help you to stay calm and prepare well for the exam. In addition, we are providing the guidance below. We would like to acknowledge the material made available via Twitter by two individuals in particular: Jemima Short, PhD candidate, Newcastle University, UK; and Dr Ethan White, Florida University, USA, which has influenced our guidance. Thanks to both for sharing their experiences.

If at all possible, try and arrange for someone to be with you during the viva. Obviously they should take no part in the formal examination, but would be there to provide moral support in the way your supervisors would. In a coronavirus pandemic, this may not be possible of course, in which case have a friend or family member 'standing by' on the phone or via video conferencing, especially at the end of the viva.

While using technology could present practical challenges, if everyone involved in the viva is patient, keeps calm and approaches it with good humour, the technology itself shouldn't add to the stress, although it might mean the process takes slightly longer. As in face to face vivas, it is not a problem to pause: while considering an examiner's question; while waiting for them to respond or to ask the next question; or to ask them to repeat a question if you haven't understood.

An independent academic should be present to chair the viva. As in a face to face viva, they are there to facilitate the smooth running of the viva and to ensure the university's process is followed appropriately. Their role includes ensuring the technology is working correctly, that all participants are comfortable and can make the technology work, and most importantly that you, the candidate, are

happy with the process. If you need a break, or have any other problem, just ask the chair if they can pause the viva briefly and let you speak with them privately.

The university will have put in place arrangements for your examiners to advise you when they are ready for the viva to begin (e.g. by email), and should have also established a form of contact (e.g. phone) in case you need to make contact separately from the online technology.

Those who have experienced online vivas have provided useful practical advice, including: the possibility of speech distortion; and the need for the person speaking to pause occasionally so other participants can indicate if they haven't heard, or have missed something - as in a face to face viva, you shouldn't be afraid to ask questions, for clarification, or for something to be repeated. Another useful practical tip is to keep your desk clear and only have in front of you things you will need during the viva, such as a copy of your thesis and some writing materials, as well as enough water to last you through the exam. It is also important you won't be interrupted during the viva (have your phone in silent mode while ensuring you can see who is calling) and that your environment is as quiet as possible. The most important thing is that you should feel as comfortable as possible during the viva: there is no need to dress differently from normal unless a different style will make you feel more relaxed, or more formal, whichever suits you.

Finally, try to enjoy your viva – focus on your work and the examiners' questions and put in place some celebratory arrangements at the end, even if they are remote.

Good luck!

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