

Guidance Notes for a Research Degree Examination

(MPhil, PhD and Professional Doctorate)

These notes are supplementary to and should be read in conjunction with Birmingham City University's Regulations for the Award of the University's Degrees of Master of Philosophy, Doctor of Philosophy and Doctor in an area of Professional Practice which are available via [Academic Regulations and Policies for Research Degrees | Birmingham City University](#). Please contact the Doctoral Research College (DRC) team via Research.Exams@bcu.ac.uk should you have any further questions.

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Examiners should contact the Doctoral Research College (DRC) for any clarification of these guidance notes and procedures or any aspect of the Regulations. The DRC can be contacted via Research.Exams@bcu.ac.uk.
- 1.2 Examiners should read these notes and the University's Research Degrees Regulations before completing the Preliminary Report Form. Examiners will be provided with a copy of the Regulations by the DRC.
- 1.3 Throughout these notes for guidance, where the term "viva voce" or "viva" is used, it should be deemed to apply equally to "oral examination" or an "approved alternative examination".
- 1.4 Throughout these notes, where the term "thesis" is used, it should be deemed to apply collectively to all examinable elements.
- 1.5 **All** correspondence between the examiners and the University regarding the arrangements for the viva voce and all subsequent communication of the examiners' recommendations should be routed exclusively via the DRC.
- 1.6 The Complaints and Appeals process for PGR examinations is detailed in the University's Research Degree regulations.

2. The Viva Voce – General

- 2.1 All candidates will normally undergo a viva-voce, on their programme of work and on the field of study in which the programme lies, which will be conducted in English. Exceptionally, the University may approve an alternative form of examination (see regulation G8.5). Where the University has approved an alternative form of examination, examiners will be advised of this and of the nature of the alternative examination.
- 2.2 Exam arrangements must comply with the University's Research Degree regulations and be approved by the Faculty Research Degrees and Environment Committee (FRDEC).
- 2.3 The viva voce will be chaired by a member of academic staff who is independent of the candidate, has experience of the supervision and examination of research degrees and an excellent understanding of the University's research degree regulations and policies. The Chair can be from any Faculty of the University.
- 2.4 Viva voce examinations for research degrees will normally take place on University premises and all participants will attend the examination in person. The process by which remote attendance is allowed is detailed in section 5.

- 2.5 The thesis shall be sent to the examiners by the DRC. Examiners should not accept a thesis directly from the candidate or a member of the supervisory team, and any such occurrence should be reported to the DRC.
- 2.6 Where the examination includes practice elements for assessment (e.g. exhibitions, installations, performances, physical artefacts such as prototypes or objects, or any other work assessed through observation), these should generally be documented through photographs. Where the nature of the practical work cannot be adequately captured in a photograph, a video recording must be submitted. Video submissions must not exceed five minutes in length. If the full recording exceeds five minutes, a representative five-minute extract must be submitted instead. The documentation must be submitted by the candidate to the DRC within ten working days of the viva.

3. Conduct of the Examination

- 3.1 Arrangements for the viva voce will be made by the DRC in liaison with the Faculty's Research Degrees Co-ordinator, or nominee, and not by a member of the candidate's examining team or the Chair.
- 3.2 Research degree candidates should not be involved in the nomination of their examination panel, including the Chair.
- 3.3 Research degree candidates should have no involvement in the arrangements of their examination. There may be exceptions where reasonable adjustments apply (see section 6) or where there is a practical element to the viva voce, which may require input from the candidate.
- 3.4 Research degree candidates should have no contact with anyone on the examination panel in relation to their examination until their award is formally approved. Faculties should ensure the candidate is not known to any member of the examination panel to an extent where the independence or integrity of the examination process could be jeopardised.
- 3.5 A minimum of six weeks should normally be allowed between the submission of the thesis to the DRC and the viva voce taking place. This is required to ensure the examiners have sufficient time to complete their independent reports and return these to the DRC prior to the examination.
- 3.6 All examiners' preliminary reports should be submitted to the DRC at least one week in advance of the planned event to enable the DRC to distribute these to the examination panel and allow the examining team to engage in a meaningful pre-viva meeting.
- 3.7 Approximately one week prior to the viva voce, the DRC will provide the panel with the relevant forms and information, including:
- the preliminary report of each examiner;

- the current university regulations relating to research degrees;
- the viva outcome report form;

- 3.8 The viva voce should take place in suitably quiet and confidential environments and reasonable steps should be taken by the Chair and DRC staff on-site to ensure that the examination will not be affected by interruptions or undue levels of noise.
- 3.9 If the Chair, the candidate or any member of the examining team cannot be present for the viva voce, the viva must be rescheduled.
- 3.10 Where a participant becomes unavailable, and time permits it, alternative examination arrangements may (depending on the circumstances) be submitted to FRDEC for approval, which may be by Chair's Action.
- 3.11 A formal preliminary private meeting of the examiners and the Chair will be scheduled by the DRC to permit discussion of the thesis and the drawing up of an agenda for the viva voce. Supervisors or other university staff (other than examiners and Chair) are not permitted to attend the preliminary meeting. All examiners' preliminary reports should be circulated to the Chair and the examiners by the DRC at least one week in advance of the planned event to enable the examining team to engage in a meaningful pre-viva meeting. The pre-viva meeting should commence at least one hour prior to the viva start time.
- 3.12 With the prior agreement of the candidate, the candidate's supervisor/s may attend the viva voce as a silent observer. Supervisors are not permitted to participate in the discussion between the examiners and the candidate (unless specifically invited to do so by the Chair) and must withdraw prior to the examiners' deliberations on the outcome of the examination. The supervisor/s may, with the agreement of the candidate, be permitted to attend the candidate feedback session following the formalising of the examiners' deliberations.
- 3.13 A candidate's supervisor, who is attending the viva voce as a silent observer may, in exceptional circumstances, be invited by the Chair of the examination to provide clarification on a specific issue required by the examiners. A supervisor may not otherwise comment on any other aspect of the candidate's thesis or contribute to any other aspect of the viva voce.

Recommendations

- 3.14 At the end of the viva voce, the Chair should ask the candidate (and their supervisor, if attending) to withdraw, so that the examiners may deliberate privately on the outcome and agree their recommendation. The permissible recommendations are set out in section G13 of the Regulations.
- 3.15 The Chair will assist the examiners in reaching, where possible, a unanimous agreement on the outcome of the examination in accordance with the University's regulations.

- 3.15.1 Where examiners consider that the thesis meets the standard to justify the award, the recommendation should be that the candidate be awarded the degree.
- 3.15.2 Where examiners consider that the thesis already meets the standard to justify the award but that the thesis would benefit from changes of a **minor** nature, the recommendation should be the granting of the award subject to minor amendments. It is to be noted that the default timeframe for such minor amendments to be made is 6 weeks, but the examining team has discretion to extend this period up to a maximum of 6 months when appropriately justified on the examiners' recommendations form.

Minor amendments should include:

- corrections or changes which the examiners feel would improve the presentation of the thesis and would include for example correction of typographical, spelling or stylistic errors;
- slight reordering of, but not significant amendment to, content;
- amendments to the abstract;
- changes to the presentation of diagrams, charts or tables;
- correction of errors in referencing;
- minor changes which are intended to provide clarification.

If examiners consider that changes of this nature are not sufficient to bring the thesis up to the required standard and the required changes are therefore more substantive, then the recommendation should be major amendments (see 3.15.3) or resubmission (see 3.15.4).

- 3.15.3 Where examiners consider that the thesis has in general reached the standard required for the degree but consider that the candidate's thesis requires some **major** amendments and corrections, the recommendation should be the granting of the award subject to major amendments. It is to be noted that the default timeframe for such major amendments to be made is 6 months, but the examining team has discretion to extend this period up to a maximum of 12 months, when appropriately justified on the examiners' recommendations form.

Major amendments should be corrections or changes to improve the content, analysis or clarification, but when the originality of the central thesis is recognised. Major amendments

- can involve rewriting or significant changes to the way research outcomes are presented;
- might require the student to provide additional content or undertake restructuring of content;
- and might necessitate reanalysis of existing data.

Major amendments should not require any further research being undertaken. If examiners consider that changes of this nature are required to bring the thesis up to the required standard, and the required changes are therefore substantive, then the recommendation should be resubmission.

3.15.4 Where examiners consider that the thesis does not yet meet the standard for the award, the recommendation should be **resubmission**. The examiners have the option of recommending resubmission either with or without a further viva voce and with or without being requested to revise the thesis:

- Where the candidate's performance in the first viva voce was satisfactory but the thesis was unsatisfactory and the examiners on re-examination certify that the thesis as revised is satisfactory, the examiners may recommend exempting the candidate from an oral re-examination.
- Where the candidate's performance in the first viva voce was unsatisfactory and the thesis was also unsatisfactory, the examiners should recommend a re-examination of the revised thesis and another viva voce.
- Where on the first examination the candidate's thesis was satisfactory but the performance in the viva voce was not satisfactory, the candidate can be re-examined in the viva voce, subject to the time limits prescribed in sub-paragraph G 14.1.3 of the Academic Regulations for Research Degrees, without being requested to revise and re-submit the thesis.

3.15.5 Research degree candidates are **limited to two attempts** at examination. Therefore, for re-examination of a resubmitted thesis, the option of recommending a further resubmission is not available to examiners. Examiners may recommend that

- the award be granted,
- the award be granted subject to minor amendments,
- the award be granted subject to major amendment
- or that the candidate not be awarded.
- In the case of a PhD, the examiners may also recommend that the thesis be revised and resubmitted for the award of MPhil.

3.15.6 In the case of a PhD examination, where the examiners consider that the thesis does not meet the standard for the award, they may recommend that the candidate be not awarded the degree of PhD but be invited to submit for the award of MPhil instead. In that case, the examiners may recommend that the degree of MPhil be awarded subject to the presentation of the thesis amended to the satisfaction of the examiners. Under this option, the candidate must confirm in writing their agreement to waive the right to be re-assessed for the award of a PhD as is detailed in sub-paragraph G 13.4.5 of the Academic Regulations for Research Degrees.

3.16 The Chair will lead the oral feedback to the candidate and ensure that the candidate is given clear information about the examiners' recommendations and the formal follow-up procedures. The examiners may indicate informally their recommendation on the result of the examination to the candidate. The Chair should make it clear to the candidate that this feedback is **provisional** only, and that any examiners' recommendation is subject to the approval of the University's Research Committee and confirm that a formal written report on the outcome will be sent to the candidate by the DRC.

Following the viva voce

3.17 Following the viva voce, the Chair will ensure that all paperwork is completed correctly and returned promptly to the DRC:

- The examiners' recommendations form must be completed and then signed by all examiners and the Chair if the examiners are in agreement about the outcome of the viva voce.
- Where regulations G13.4.2 – 4 apply (i.e. the award is made subject to amendments or the candidate is invited to resubmit), it will be the responsibility of the Chair to co-ordinate the production of a comprehensive list of the required amendments and to ensure that the list is approved by all examiners and submitted to the DRC within 10 working days of the viva voce.
- Where the examiners cannot reach an agreed decision, each examiner must complete and sign a separate examiners' recommendations form to indicate their recommendation. In this circumstance, it will be the responsibility of the Chair to complete a report on the examination process and make a recommendation to the Research Environment and Training Committee (RETC) on the possible outcome. The Chair must then ensure that all reports are returned to the DRC following the viva.

3.18 Following the completion of the viva voce examination, the DRC will provide the preliminary reports and the viva outcome report containing the recommendations of the examiners to the Chair of RETC for approval.

3.19 Where a candidate is required to make amendments (i.e. where regulations section G 13.4.2 and G 13.4.3 apply), the examiners should agree at the viva (and on the examiners' recommendations form) which examiner/s are to scrutinise the revised thesis. The nominated examiner/s will each be required to submit an independent report following their scrutiny of the revised thesis, confirming or otherwise that the required changes have been made to their satisfaction.

3.20 Where a candidate is required to resubmit their thesis for the award (i.e. where regulations section G 13.4.4 applies), all the examiners are required to examine the resubmitted thesis. Each examiner will be required to submit an independent report on the resubmitted thesis.

Upon receipt of the examiners' independent reports on the resubmitted thesis, the Independent Chair will, in consultation with the DRC, determine whether or not further discussion is required between examiners.

- Where all examiners agree that the amendments required following the initial viva voce have been met and that the award is justified, a further discussion or meeting would not be necessary.

- In cases where at least one examiner considers the original amendments not yet fulfilled, the Chair would determine whether further discussion between the examiners was necessary and what form the discussion should take (electronic, campus-based, etc.). This should always occur in consultation with the DRC. The discussion between the examiners should allow them to come to an agreement on whether the resubmitted thesis meets the conditions for an award or arrive at a mutually agreed set of further requirements, if appropriate.

4. Summary of Responsibilities of the Examining Team

Independent Chair

General

- 4.1 The Chair will be independent of both the candidate's supervisory team and their examining team and will be experienced in the supervision and examining of research degree candidates. Although the Chair may have knowledge of the candidate's academic field, they are not selected based on their subject expertise.
- 4.2 The Chair must ensure that they are familiar with the Research Degrees Regulations and examination procedures and consult with the DRC in advance of the examination on any matters of which they are unsure.
- 4.3 Whilst the Chair will be provided with a copy of the thesis at the same time as the examiners, the Chair is not an examiner and will not be required to read the thesis or to complete a preliminary report.
- 4.4 The Chair will remain impartial throughout the preliminary discussion and the viva voce and will not act as an advocate for the University, the Faculty or the candidate.

At the preliminary meeting

- 4.5 The Chair will not contribute to the academic examination of the thesis but will assist the examiners in the preliminary meeting in the drawing up of an agreed agenda and allocation of questions to examiners in preparation for the viva voce.

During the viva voce

- 4.6 The Chair will explain to all present at the examination the status and role of each participant and outline the process to be followed.
- 4.7 The Chair will ensure that the candidate is introduced to each member of the examining team.

- 4.8 The Chair will endeavour to develop and maintain an environment in which the candidate will be able to perform to the best of their ability and one in which the candidate is treated with appropriate courtesy.
- 4.9 The Chair should intervene in the examination process if they judge that fairness to the candidate or integrity of the examination process is at risk.
- 4.10 The Chair should ensure that the examination adheres to the agreed agenda and that all the issues raised by the examiners at the preliminary meeting are covered during the viva voce.
- 4.11 The Chair, in exceptional circumstances only, may invite the candidate's supervisor (if in attendance) to provide further clarification on a point relating to procedural aspects of the candidate's thesis, if this is required by the examiners and cannot be provided by the candidate.
- 4.12 The Chair will ensure compliance with University regulations, policies, procedures and protocols, providing guidance to the examiners where necessary.

Following the viva voce

- 4.13 The Chair is responsible for leading the private discussions of the examiners after the viva voce, steering the team towards a unanimous conclusion and recommendations wherever possible, and leading the oral feedback to the candidate.
- 4.14 The Chair will co-ordinate the completion and return of paperwork to the DRC and ensure that a confirmed list of required amendments is produced where this is required (see 3.17).

Internal and External Examiners

The responsibilities of examiners include:

- 4.15 To read the candidate's thesis with necessary care and to submit a preliminary report on the appropriate form within the required timescales. The preliminary report should be written without consultation with the candidate, their supervisors, the other examiners or the Chair of the examining team. Each preliminary report should conclude with a short summary containing a provisional recommendation. Where an examiner wishes to suspend judgement until after the viva voce, this should be indicated. The completed and signed preliminary reports must be sent to the DRC at least one week before the viva voce is due to take place. The viva voce cannot take place until the preliminary reports have been received.
- 4.16 To attend and participate in the examiners' preliminary meeting and the viva voce.
- 4.17 To contribute to the maintenance of an examination environment in which the candidate will be able to perform to the best of their ability and one in which the candidate is treated with appropriate courtesy.

- 4.18 To attend the feedback session to the candidate at the end of the viva voce and, where appropriate, to explain detailed points to the candidate in the oral feedback.
- 4.19 To complete and sign the Examiners' Recommendation Form immediately after the completion of the viva voce, to confirm agreement with the outcome of the examination as cited on the form.

Where the examiners cannot reach an agreed decision, each examiner must complete and sign a separate examiners' recommendations form to indicate their recommendation (see 3.17).

- 4.20 As appropriate, to contribute to the production of a list of required corrections and/or list of deficiencies in the thesis and to formally confirm their agreement with the list.
- 4.21 If the candidate is asked to make minor or major amendments, the examiners will agree on which member(s) of the examining team should be responsible for scrutinising the amendments (see 3.18). If the candidate is required to resubmit a revised thesis for re-examination, all examiners will be involved in the re-examination of the resubmitted thesis (see 3.20).

5. Remote attendance

Introduction

- 5.1 Viva voce examinations for research degrees will normally take place on University premises with the physical attendance of all participants.
- 5.2 The remote attendance of external examiners must be approved by FRDEC when the examination arrangements are considered.
- 5.3 Remote attendance by an internal examiner, the Chair or the candidate will be permitted only in exceptional circumstances and must also be approved by FRDEC through the examination arrangements.
- 5.4 Where remote participation is proposed for a viva, a description of and justification for the proposed arrangements must be submitted to FRDEC. The Committee should take into account any sensitivities or security issues relating to the content of the thesis that might make remote attendance inappropriate.
- 5.5 Where remote attendance is proposed, all parties (including the candidate and examiners) must be made aware of the proposed alternative arrangements prior to FRDEC's approval.
- 5.6 The environment used to conduct the remote exam will normally be managed by the DRC. The DRC will consider any time differences, which may necessitate changes to the format

of the examination (e.g. having the preliminary meeting of the examiners on the day preceding the examination).

- 5.7 Where the need for remote attendance arises only after the examination arrangements have been approved, a change to the examination arrangements must be approved by FRDEC (or by FRDEC Chair's Action) before the viva takes place.

Remote Attendance by the Student

- 5.8 Research degree candidates are expected to attend the viva voce in person, irrespective of their mode of study, fee status or normal place of domicile. Agreement for a candidate to participate remotely will therefore only be granted in exceptional circumstances or where reasonable adjustments apply (see section 6).
- 5.9 The candidate must have a valid form of ID available as checks may be undertaken at the outset of the viva to demonstrate the probity and security of the examination process.
- 5.10 The candidate will be expected to meet any additional costs arising from their remote attendance at the viva.

Remote Attendance by an Examiner

- 5.11 Examiners are normally expected to attend the examination in person and agreement for remote attendance by an internal examiner will therefore only be granted in exceptional circumstances by FRDEC. Where it is not possible for an external examiner to attend in person, remote attendance should be requested in the exam arrangements and approved by FRDEC.
- 5.12 Where agreement is given for an examiner to participate remotely, all the University's other expectations and requirements of examiners will pertain. This shall include the requirement to submit a preliminary report to the DRC in advance of the examination and to contribute to the final recommendations of the examiners including, depending on the examiners' recommendation, the drawing up a list of required minor amendments or a list of deficiencies in the thesis.

Technology

- 5.13 Contact details, email and phone numbers for those individuals attending remotely should be provided by each of them to the DRC ahead of time to ensure they can be contacted via alternate means in the event of technological failure.
- 5.14 The mode of technology used to enable remote attendance should be fit for purpose (high quality, secure, reliable and enabling real-time, face-to-face discussion) to ensure a high-quality experience for all participants in the viva process; and to ensure that the confidentiality and probity of the examination process can be assured. The University's IT-approved video conferencing software should be used wherever possible.

- 5.15 In the event of technical failure during the viva, the Independent Chair will take responsibility for proposing alternative arrangements on the day and reporting the incident to the DRC. The nature of any alternative arrangements will depend on the particular circumstances and timing but may involve temporarily adjourning the viva to allow technical problems to be resolved, arranging alternative facilities or rearranging the viva for another date. The Chair will confirm the alternative arrangements with the examiners, the candidate, the Faculty and the DRC.

6. Reasonable adjustments

- 6.1 The viva process and guidance has been designed to remove barriers for all candidates during the viva and has been embedded in standard practices wherever possible. This should reduce the need for candidates to request specific accommodations. In addition, reasonable adjustments are available to ensure that all PGR candidates can participate in viva voces on an equitable basis. The presence of any reasonable adjustments (put in place in line with the below) should have no impact on the probity of the examination process and is of no detriment to the candidate.
- 6.2 **Disclosure and Planning:** candidates should disclose any need for reasonable adjustments in the thesis submission form. Reasonable adjustments are determined by the Enablement team in consultation with the DRC and with input from the Director of Studies, where necessary, and are tailored to the individual student's needs.
- 6.3 **Communication and Consent:**
- 6.3.1 The DRC will inform the candidate of any applicable processes and timescales.
 - 6.3.2 The DRC will share relevant details with the Chair and examiners in line with guidance from the Enablement team to facilitate the implementation of reasonable adjustments.
- 6.4 **Chairing responsibilities:** the Chair should remind the examiners of the reasonable adjustments at the preliminary discussion and give any specific instructions as agreed.
- 6.5 For further support, candidates can discuss the viva process and any concerns with their supervisors well in advance and can seek further guidance from the DRC.