

DOCTORAL RESEARCH COLLEGE – BUSINESS CONTINUITY

Guidance on Conducting Viva Voce Examinations Remotely and Online

In the current exceptional circumstances, where viva-voce examinations are not postponed, they may be conducted remotely, online using video calling/conferencing with each party attending from separate locations.

Whilst the viva will take place under different conditions, expectations regarding the conduct of the examination remain the same in terms of the Examiner input and the behaviour of all participants. Participants are reminded that the University's [Guidance Notes for Research Degree Examinations](#) remain applicable.

The arrangements for remote conduct should ensure that the robustness and integrity, confidentiality and validity of the examination process is maintained. Attention of participants is also drawn to the UK Council for Graduate Education's document entitled: [Conducting Vivas Online: A Guide for Institutions and Candidates](#).

The following should be taken into account for any viva voce examination using remote attendance:

1. Decision to proceed with remote attendance:

- 1.1 It is the Candidate's decision to either proceed with a remote viva or to postpone their viva until circumstances permit it to go ahead face-to-face. Candidates should discuss this with their supervisors.
- 1.2 It is noted that in some special cases, where an exhibition of physical artefacts or similar is an essential part of the academic examination process, it may not be possible to proceed with a remote viva.
- 1.3 The Candidate will be asked to confirm their decision via a specific question in the Candidate's Declaration Form.

2. Consents:

- 2.1 Explicit consent from all participants for the examination to take place remotely via online video conferencing must be obtained. It is not permissible for the examination to be conducted by audio only or by telephone.
- 2.2 Explicit consent from all participants is also required for the viva voce examination to be recorded. Consent is achieved as follows:
 - Candidate – via Candidate's Declaration Form
 - Examiners and Chair – via the RESEXMARRS approval process paperwork submitted to FRDEC.
- 2.3 If a remote viva voce examination is due to take place and the above consents have not yet been sought, the Faculty DRC should contact all participants for agreement to proceed remotely and consent to record.

3. Default Platform and Recording of the viva voce examination

- 3.1 The default platform for use in any remote attendance of a viva voce examination is MS Teams. This allows the University to ensure that GDPR guidelines are being followed. If there are any potential problems with the use of this platform, then the DRC should be alerted immediately.
- 3.2 It is expected that, where a viva voce examination is to take place using remote attendance as described in this document, it will be recorded.
- 3.3 It should be made clear to the Candidate and the Examiners by the Chair that the purpose of the recording is for no other reason than to evidence that the quality of technical connection was sufficient to not significantly impact on the proceedings. Following the viva, the recording will be stored securely for a maximum of three months following the confirmation of the outcome of the examination, or until the date of the award (whichever is the sooner) after which time it will be deleted.

4. Appeals and remote attendance:

- 4.1 The Candidate should be aware that if they agree to proceed with the viva being conducted remotely using video conferencing, the method/format cannot be used as grounds for a later appeal. This will be clarified in the Candidate's Declaration Form.
- 4.2 Should the Candidate feel that the quality of the technical connection was so impaired that it had a significant impact on proceedings, then this should be logged with the Doctoral Research College within 10 working days of the viva voce examination.

5. Wider context of participants:

- 5.1 The Independent Chair must ensure that they are fully aware of any contextual / particular / individual Candidate circumstances in the operation of the viva voce examination (for example: caring responsibilities / family members with special needs / requirement for regular breaks) and that they are supportive of this for all participants.

6. Before the day of the examination:

- 6.1 Examiners should have submitted their preliminary reports electronically and the central DRC team will send all examination paperwork to the Chair as normal.
- 6.2 All participants must provide a contact telephone number to the DRC.
- 6.3 All participants must be responsible for the appropriateness, security and integrity of their environment in order to avoid unnecessary interruptions and distractions.
- 6.4 The Faculty DRC should confirm with the Candidate's supervisor (usually the Director of Studies) who will be available on the day of the examination to verify the identity of the Candidate at the start of the viva and to join remotely at the end of the viva when the result is delivered.
- 6.5 Test/rehearsal call to all participants to be arranged by the Chair, minimum of 48hrs before examination to check technology works, quality of sound and vision and that each location is suitable.
- 6.6 Chair to place MS Teams (or agreed equivalent) meeting in the calendar of all participants for the Examiners' Preliminary meeting and, separately, the Viva Voce examination itself. This to ensure that:
 - a) Each of the two meetings is attended only by the specified delegates, and no overlap is possible.
 - b) There is sufficient time built into the schedule for the Examiners and Chair to have a break between the Examiners' Preliminary Meeting and the Viva Voce examination.
- 6.7 Faculty DRC to arrange separate video call with the External Examiner/s to perform UKVI check (External Examiner should provide soft copies of documents and during the call, hold up original documents to the camera for verification).
- 6.8 All participants must confirm access to the following:

- a) Reliable internet connection with sufficient speed to facilitate video calling from multiple locations.
- b) Reliable and suitable hardware (web-cam, PC/laptop, headphones or headset if possible).
- c) Appropriate software (MS Teams should be used as the default platform for video conferencing for viva voce examinations)
- d) A private, quiet space where they will not be interrupted for the duration of the examination.

7. On the day of the examination:

7.1 The examination will follow the normal format for a viva-voce examination. All participants should be aware of the following additions for remote/electronic attendance:

- a) A member of the Candidate's supervisory team will be called in to verify the Candidate's identity before the viva commences. If a supervisor cannot be present, the DRC will join the meeting temporarily to confirm the Candidate's identity.
- b) The Candidate will also be asked at the outset to confirm any materials present such as a hard copy of their thesis and any materials declared should remain visible where possible.
- c) If the supervisor is approved to be in attendance as a silent observer of the examination (in line with standard University Guidance), then they should attend remotely but with their video and microphone muted.
- d) The Chair should ensure that all parties introduce themselves and their role.
- e) All parties should remain visible throughout.
 - All parties should consider blurring their background via the video link, where possible, to enhance privacy.
- f) The examination will be recorded via the Chair (there is the option in MS Team to start recording and this should be actioned once contact is made with the Examiners and should continue until the end of the examination, including the delivery of the result and feedback to the Candidate).
 - Please note that the recording should be made of the viva voce examination **only**. The preliminary discussion meeting, the examiners deliberations and the feedback to the candidate should **not** be recorded.
- g) The Chair must remain mindful of data security and should NOT share any documents and files (including any reports or the file of the video recording) using the MS Teams files/chat functions, but should, instead, use dedicated OneDrive for Business folder.
- h) At the end of the examination and before the Candidate is dismissed, the Chair should ask all participants to confirm that the remote viva using video conferencing / remote attendance has had no detrimental effect on the examination process.
- i) Once the examination process has been completed, the video recording should be downloaded from MS Stream by the Chair and then be sent to the DRC via a **OneDrive link**.
 - It is important that the video is downloaded from Stream *immediately after the viva* and, once download is assured, the video should be deleted.
 - The video recording may not be deleted direct from the Chat area of MS Teams. The video recording must be deleted from MS Stream, which removes the recording from all areas of MS Teams (NB: ensure that the recording is safely downloaded first).
 - If not deleted, any attendees of the meeting will be able to access the video afterwards.
 - Further guidance is available online [here](#).

This will allow the central DRC team to extract the file safely for storage.

8. Technical failure:

- 8.1 If the connection drops for one or all of the participants then reasonable attempts should be made to re-establish the connection.
- 8.2 If connection is not re-established after a reasonable number of attempts and time then the examination may need to be abandoned. If sufficient discussion has taken place, it may be possible for the Examiners to recommend an outcome.

8.3 In the event of a technical failure or other disturbance to the conduct of the viva, it should be at the discretion of the Chair to exercise judgement in terms of the level and nature of impact on proceedings and whether or not it is deemed significant enough to necessitate the curtailment of the examination and need to re-schedule or postpone until circumstances permit a face-to-face viva to take place. The Chair may consult with the Examiners in deciding whether or not to recommence, abandon, reschedule or postpone.

9. Video conferencing Tips:

- 9.1 Using a headphones/headset may make it easier to hear conversations clearly.
- 9.2 Mute your microphone when you are not speaking to minimise background noise.
- 9.3 Sit with your back to a wall rather than a window.
- 9.4 Ensure everyone is aware when recording is taking place.
- 9.5 The same common courtesies apply online as they would face to face e.g. greet and say goodbye as normal.
- 9.6 Be patient and understanding when things go wrong, or if unexpected interruptions are experienced while participants face unavoidable self-isolation measures.

10. Following the viva voce examination:

- 10.1 The Chair will collate the paperwork as is expected in line with the Guidance Notes for a Research degree Examination.
- 10.2 Electronic signature (or email addresses) will be accepted in lieu of original signatures where the viva voce has taken place electronically
- 10.3 The Chair will submit all completed and collated papers to DoctoralResearchCollege@bcu.ac.uk
- 10.4 The recommendation of the Examiners will be considered/ratified in the usual way (remotely) by Research Committee, and formal notification will be issued to the Candidate by the DRC via email.
- 10.5 The Chair will ensure that the video recording is uploaded to the agreed location (see section 7.1 j) and immediately deleted from any local drives.