Research Degrees Programmes and Examinations Board

Research Degrees - policy on video-link/online progression review meetings and examination vivas during the Covid-19 situation

The Faculty Deputy Deans for Research and the Research Degrees Programmes and Examinations Board have reviewed and revised the policy concerning video-link/online examinations and annual review of progression meetings implemented with effect from 19 March 2020 when the national lockdown came into effect. The updated policy is annexed.

The review of the policy noted these points:

- the current Covid-19 guidance on travel, face-to-face meetings, and social distancing measures, the tiered system of Covid Alert Levels and the likelihood of other national restrictions being implemented from time to time at short notice;
- it is very likely that most examination vivas and annual progression review meetings will be held online in 2020-21;
- experience has been gained across all academic departments by staff and students in managing and participating in online meetings, supervision meetings, progression review meetings and viva examinations. The stability of the online platforms hosting these meetings has exceeded initial expectations at the beginning of the March 2020 lockdown. Feedback indicates that holding these events online has worked satisfactorily;
- the need to reconsider the recommendation in policy version 1 that progression review meetings and examination vivas where the decision was likely to be an unsuccessful one might be deferred until an in-person examination was possible. The ongoing situation indicates that this policy needs to be amended so that all progression review meetings and examination vivas may be held online;
- feedback from some academic departments that it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify an Independent Chair for online vivas.

The main changes made to the policy are:

- all annual progression review meetings and viva examinations may be held online;
- for the viva examination the candidate has the right to choose the format of their examination: either online or in person. This does not apply to annual progression review assessment meetings which should not normally be delayed. A request from a student to defer an annual progression assessment review meeting should be made through the usual school/institute procedure;
- the thesis submission form has been revised to include a tick box for the candidate to indicate if they do not consent to an online viva. In discussing the examination arrangements, the supervisor should discuss with the candidate that if they do not wish to proceed with an online viva, a face-to-face viva may not be possible for some significant time. All participants in the viva must agree to an online viva or to hold an in person viva;
• approval for an online viva is no longer required from the appropriate Faculty Deputy Dean for Research or RDO. The Research Degrees Board has approved suspension of the Academic Regulations 8.91 and 8.92 which require specific approval of the arrangements for each online viva and attendance of an examiner or the student by video-link;

• it is not mandatory to appoint an Independent Chair for every online viva examination. Schools and institutes may consider it desirable to appoint an Independent Chair in line with the Academic Regulations and Code of Practice, for example if the examiners' combined experience of conducting research degree examinations does not meet the minimum requirements in the Academic Regulations. An Independent Chair may be appointed through the MySIS examiner nomination process or by Chair's action through the RDO if the requirement for an Independent Chair was not identified as part of the examiner nomination process;

• the Board has agreed that a new role of Viva Convenor will take on the responsibilities of the Independent Chair in the previous policy to check the IT connections prior to the viva and at the commencement and end of the viva, and to be a contact for the examiners and candidate during the viva. The Viva Convenor may be a member of the student's supervisory team or other member of academic staff in the student's school or institute. The Viva Convenor cannot be one of the examiners or a member of administrative or other departmental staff;

• examiners in their joint report will be required to confirm if the viva was held in person or online and to comment on the quality and consistency of the online connection and record any breaks in connection.

Research Degrees Programmes and Examinations Board

November 2020
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Research Degrees - policy on video-link/online annual progression review meetings and examination vivas during the Covid-19 situation

Summary

Following UK Government advice and Queen Mary guidance on working from home, limiting non-essential travel and social distancing measures the oral examination of research degree candidates and annual progression review meetings may be conducted by video-link and several or all participants may attend online. The term online vivas is used in this document.

This policy is under regular review and subject to change. Please refer to this webpage for the latest document https://www.qmul.ac.uk/doctoralcollege/covid-19-faqs---pgr/ and to the RDO webpage for examiners http://www.arcs.qmul.ac.uk/research-degrees/research-degree-examiners/

1. Principles

(a) This policy version 2 applies to
   - examiner nominations approved by the Research Degrees Board with effect from the meeting in November 2020;
   - vivas for which an Independent Chair has not yet been appointed and which do not require an Independent Chair under the Academic Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes.

(b) If an Independent Chair is already in place and the student has been told that there will be a Chair that arrangement should go ahead as already planned.

(c) It is not mandatory that the examination viva must be held online. For an examination viva, the student and examiners may consider if the viva needs to proceed at this time or should be arranged later as an in person viva if the student wishes this.

(d) By attending the examination viva or progression panel in person or online the student is declaring that they are fit to sit the examination / assessment.

(e) The online viva must use a video connection so all participants can see each other using suitable software, e.g. Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Dial in by telephone only is not permitted for any participant.

(f) For the viva examination, there must be a Viva Convenor or an Independent Chair who must confirm that the IT connections are satisfactory for the viva to proceed. For annual progression a member of the panel checks the IT connections.

(g) The Research Degrees Programmes and Examinations Board will review the policy as appropriate.
2. Requirements

(a) The examination viva panel must meet the standard regulatory requirements. There must be at least one external examiner. Nomination of examiners follows the usual process on MySIS.

(b) An Independent Chair may be appointed if desirable in line with the requirements in Annexe A, for example if the examiners’ combined experience of conducting research degree examinations does not meet the minimum requirements in the Academic Regulations.

(c) There must be a Viva Convenor who may be the student’s supervisor [see section 4] if an Independent Chair is not required.

(d) The Viva Convenor / Independent Chair convenes the examination viva meeting online and ensures compliance with this policy at the viva. They may terminate the viva if any participant makes a request to do so, for example if the quality of the online connection adversely affects the process. This includes poor sound / audibility of participants, and the student being uncomfortable or distressed.

(e) By participating in the online viva all participants (the student, examiners and Independent Chair if appointed) are deemed to have agreed to conduct the viva online and to the arrangements. If the student or an examiner or the Chair expresses concern about the online participation of themselves or any other participant a new date must be arranged for the viva either online or when the student and examiners can meet together in person.

(f) Participants may connect online from home if travel restrictions and health guidance prevent attendance from their usual place of study or work. Participants confirm that their personal IT set-up should be sufficient for the viva.

(g) Participants are required to exchange phone numbers and email addresses at least 24 hours before the viva so that they can be contacted by the Convenor/Chair if the online connection fails.

(h) Online connections must be robust and reliable to enable participants to be online continuously with visual contact for the duration of the viva - this might be 2-4 hours or sometimes longer. Breaks must be included if the viva exceeds two hours.

(i) If an examiner cannot attend (remotely or physically) on the day, the viva must be postponed and a new date arranged.

(j) If an examiner withdraws a new viva date must be organised. There must be at least a gap of 10 working days to enable the approval of a new examiner and the examination team by the Research Degrees Board by Chair’s action. There must also be sufficient time for the new examiner to read the thesis and to draft and share their preliminary report with the other examiner.

(k) The supervisor may observe the viva with the student’s agreement to be able to discuss the viva and support the student afterwards. The supervisor may not interact with the examiners or the student in any way as part of the examination.

(l) Examiners should complete the examination outcome form after the viva and email this to pgrexaminations@qmul.ac.uk. This confirms to Queen Mary that the viva has taken place and the examination outcome. The joint examiners’ report should be submitted within 10 working days. The examiners should write to pgrexaminations@qmul.ac.uk if the report will be delayed.

(m) The Viva Convenor / Independent Chair manages the procedures for the beginning and end of the viva, and the admittance and exit of the student to the call. This includes managing the welcome of the student to the examination, provision for the examiners’ private discussion to agree the examination outcome after the viva, and bringing the student back into the meeting for feedback on the outcome. The
opportunity should be offered to the student to discuss the viva with their supervisor soon afterwards.

3. **The Independent Chair**

If an Independent Chair is considered desirable for the viva examination the nomination should be made in line with the Academic Regulations, for example if the examiners’ combined experience of conducting research degree examinations does not meet the minimum requirements in the Academic Regulations. An Independent Chair may be appointed through the MySIS examiner nomination process or by RDPEB Chair’s action through the RDO if the requirement for an Independent Chair has not been identified as part of the examiner nomination process.

The Independent Chair must be a senior member of Queen Mary academic staff (Senior Lecturer, Reader or Professor) with experience of examining at least one UK PhD (or equivalent for other awards). The Independent Chair may be from the same School or Institute but should not have had any prior involvement with the project or with the student.

They should also be from a different area in the School/Institute and not from the same research group. [For this policy the Board additionally notes that in departments where there are no ‘research team / unit’ distinctions below departmental level, the Chair may be from that department, for example in English and Drama.] In all cases, the Chair must not have given the student any research input or advice.

The responsibility of the Chair is to manage the process and ensure adherence to the regulations. The Chair does not contribute to the decision regarding whether or not the standards for award have been met.

4. **Responsibilities of the Viva Convenor for the online viva examination or the Independent Chair if appointed**

The Viva Convenor or an Independent Chair if appointed is responsible for convening the online examination viva meeting. The Viva Convenor may be a member of the student’s supervisory team or other member of academic staff in the student’s school or institute. The Viva Convenor cannot be one of the examiners or a member of administrative or other departmental staff.

The Viva Convenor or Independent Chair:

   a. confirms the identity of the candidate at the beginning of the viva (if the candidate is not known to anyone at the meeting the student should be asked to show their Queen Mary ID card at the beginning). If the supervisor is not the convenor, the supervisor may attend at the beginning of the viva to confirm the candidate’s identity;

   b. arranges the exchange of phone numbers and email addresses at least 24 hours before the viva;
c. tests the online connection with all participants in advance of the viva (normally 24 hours in advance);
d. decides if the online connections are satisfactory for the viva to commence on the day;
e. is contactable by the examiners and the student during the viva should any of the connections break down during the viva and cannot be restored after a short break so that all participants are connected online. They decide whether the viva should be cancelled and a new viva date arranged;
f. manages the entrance and exit of the student from the examination. Usual practice is that the student leaves, the examiners discuss the thesis and viva, the student returns to be informed of the outcome and to discuss corrections to be made to the thesis.

Checklist of actions 24 hours ahead of the viva. The Independent Chair or Viva Convenor should

- circulate online connection details of all participants (Skype ID, MS Teams, Zoom etc);
- circulate phone numbers to enable communication if video connections fail;
- arrange a short test simultaneously with all participants to check audio and video capability;
- check ability of participants to share screens / images to enable discussion of particular figures / tables / video material etc.

5. Online progression review meetings

The general comments about conducting online assessments apply. These specific points apply to annual progression review meetings:

- all annual progression review meetings may be held online;
- annual progression review assessment panels should not normally be delayed if the meeting cannot be held in person, or where the outcome may be referral back for a second attempt or other unsuccessful outcome. A request from a student to defer an annual progression assessment review meeting should be made through the usual school/institute procedure;
- a member of the progression panel
  - circulates online connection details of all participants (Skype ID, MS Teams, Zoom etc);
  - circulates phone numbers to enable communication if video connections fail;
  - arranges a short test simultaneously with all participants to check audio and video capability;
  - checks the ability of participants to share screens / images to enable discussion of particular figures / tables / video material etc.
- the panel report should indicate if the progression panel meeting was held in person or online and comment on the quality and consistency of the online connection and record any breaks in connection
6. Notes for students

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic it is likely that most examination vivas and annual progression review meetings will be held online in 2020-21. This section brings together some of the specific comments for students in the above guidance. Please consider the following points in preparing for an online examination viva or annual progression assessment:

- all annual progression review meetings and viva examinations may be held online;
- annual progression review assessment meetings should not normally be delayed. A request from a student to defer an annual progression assessment review meeting should be made through the usual school/institute procedure;
- for the viva examination the candidate has the right to choose the format of their examination: either online or in person. All participants in the viva must agree to an online viva or to hold an in person viva. Please note that a face-to-face viva may not be possible for some significant time;
- the thesis submission form will be revised to include a tick box for the candidate to indicate if they do or do not consent to an online viva;
- by attending the examination viva or progression panel in person or online the student is declaring that they are fit to sit the examination / assessment;
- the student should be advised of the arrangements for the beginning and end of the viva and comfort breaks, including the examiners’ private discussions before the viva and at the end to agree the examination outcome, and the provision of feedback to the student on the outcome. There should be an opportunity for the student to discuss the viva with their supervisor soon afterwards. This may not always be possible on the day of the viva;
- the student should try to arrange to have someone on standby to support and celebrate with them at the end of the viva, such as a friend or family member, especially if there is no-one else in their household.

7. Contact

Please contact the Research Degrees Office with any queries at
researchdegrees@qmul.ac.uk

Research Degrees Office
Room 213, Graduate Centre
Queen Mary University of London
Mile End Road London E1 4NS

November 2020
Annexe A
For reference only

Standard requirements in the Academic Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes 2020-21

http://www.arcs.qmul.ac.uk/research-degrees/research-degree-students/index.html

Academic Regulations

The italicised sections in Regulations 8.91 and 8.92 are suspended for the 2020-21 academic year ending on 31 July 2021

8.91 The examination process is held in private, and is not a public examination. Normally, the oral examination is held at Queen Mary with the candidate and both examiners present. If agreed by the candidate, Senate or its delegated authority may under exceptional circumstances permit one of the examiners to attend the examination by video-link. In such cases an independent chair must be appointed.

8.92 If requested by the candidate, Senate or its delegated authority may under exceptional circumstances permit the candidate to attend the examination by video link. Both examiners must be present in person at Queen Mary. The candidate must attend the examination from an approved location in a recognised University or other approved body, such as the British Council, and a member of that organisation’s academic or professional staff must act as invigilator and be present in the room with the candidate for the duration of the examination.

Code of Practice

Panel of Examiners

118. A Panel of Examiners is established for each individual examination of an MPhil, PhD, MD(Res), DrPS, DPsych and DClinDent.

119. The Panel of Examiners comprises a minimum of two examiners appointed by the Research Degrees Programmes and Examinations Board on behalf of the Senate.

120. Examiners may be nominated as follows:

Either

• one internal examiner from the academic staff of Queen Mary University of London who has not been involved in the candidate’s work and has not been a member of the candidate’s progression panel(s); and

• one external examiner;

or

• where the criteria above for an internal examiner cannot be met or a School/Institute considers it to be academically desirable two external examiners may be appointed.
121. If the candidate is a member of Queen Mary staff normally two examiners who are external to Queen Mary shall be appointed.

122. In some cases, an independent chair may be appointed to the Panel of Examiners. The independent chair must be a senior member of academic staff (Senior Lecturer, Reader or Professor) with experience of examining at least one UK PhD (or equivalent for other awards). The independent chair may be from the same School or Institute but should not have had any prior involvement with the project or with the student. They should also be from a different area in the School/Institute and not from the same research group / sub-department or unit / centre. In such cases, the responsibility of the chair is to manage the process and ensure adherence to the regulations. The chair does not contribute to the decision regarding whether or not the standards for award have been met.

123. The candidate may invite their supervisor to attend the examination but the supervisor may not participate in the examination and must absent themselves when the decision regarding the outcome of the examination is to be made. If the candidate does not wish the supervisor to be present, he/she should make this clear at the time of examination entry.