



Research Degrees Programmes and Examinations Board

Research Degree Examinations - policy on video-link/online vivas during the coronavirus 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 may be conducted by video-link and several or all participants may attend online. The term online vivas is used in this document.

Requests must be sent to the Research Degrees Office to arrange approval by the appropriate Faculty Deputy Dean for Research Degrees Programmes.

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/>

The Research Degrees Office webpages are being updated to reflect these changes and this process will take a few days due to the transition to remote working.

For reference:

- Annexe A sets out the standard examination requirements in the Academic Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes 2019-20
- Annexe B sets out the information for RDO and staff submitting requests for remote online vivas.

1. Principles

- (a) This policy is in place for the duration of the covid-19 situation only. The policy was approved on 19 March 2020.
- (b) While we are moving to a position of allowing vivas online, it is not compulsory. The student and examiners should consider if the viva needs to proceed at this time or should be arranged later as an in person viva.
- (c) Online examinations requested by the student to take up a job offer or other personal circumstances, such as absence due to pregnancy, underlying health conditions etc. are encouraged to proceed online.
- (d) By attending the viva in person or online the student is declaring that they are fit to sit the examination.
- (e) The viva must use a video connection so all participants can see each other. Dial in by telephone only is not permitted for any participant. Online connection means a video connection so that all participants can see each other using suitable software, e.g. Skype, Zoom or Microsoft Teams.
- (f) There must be an Independent Chair who must agree that the online viva can proceed on the day.
- (g) The online connection must be such that the Chair can confirm that:

- the examination process has been conducted with academic rigour and fairness to the candidate;
 - the discussion between the candidate and the examiners reflects the examiners' final recommendation on the examination outcome form and in their joint report after the viva;
 - the conduct of the viva is in line with the standards required for a doctoral award.
- (h) The Research Degrees Programmes and Examinations Board will decide the withdrawal of the policy and date of effect.

2. Requirements

- (a) The examination 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) There must be an Independent Chair. The Chair convenes the viva meeting online and ensures compliance with the Academic Regulations and the quality of the examination. The Chair may terminate the viva if any participant makes a request to do so, in particular 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.
- (c) All participants, the student, examiners and Chair, must agree to an online viva 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 when the student and examiners can meet together in person.
- (d) 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.
- (e) Participants are required to exchange phone numbers at least 24 hours before the viva so that they can be contacted by the Chair if the online connection fails.
- (f) The examiner's preliminary reports must be sent to the Chair and the Research Degrees Office at least 48 hours in advance of the viva. If either of the preliminary examiner's reports indicate that the viva outcome may be Re-entry, MPhil, Not Pass or Fail, the Chair should discuss this with the examiners. The Chair decides if the online viva will proceed. If it is clear that the viva will not change these outcomes, the Chair should cancel the viva. It must be deferred until a viva can take place in person. After a decision is taken to cancel the viva the Chair may discuss with the supervisor to arrange informal feedback to the student.
- (g) 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.
- (h) If an examiner cannot attend (remotely or physically) on the day, the viva must be postponed and a new date arranged.
- (i) If an examiner withdraws a new viva date must be organised. There must be at least a 5 day gap to enable the approval of a new examiner by the Research Degrees Board by Chair's action. There must be sufficient time for the new examiner to read the thesis and to draft and share their preliminary report with the other examiner and the Chair.
- (j) 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 during the examination.

- (k) Examiners must complete the examination outcome form immediately after the viva and email this to researchdegrees@qmul.ac.uk. This confirms to Queen Mary that the viva has taken place and the examination outcome. The joint examiners' report should ideally follow within the next 5 days. The standard deadline is 10 working days. The examiners should write to researchdegrees@qmul.ac.uk if the report will be delayed.

3. Role of the Independent Chair

All online vivas must have an Independent Chair approved by the appropriate Faculty Deputy Dean for Research Degree Programmes.

1. Definition of the Independent Chair

The definition of the Independent Chair has been broadened to allow other academic staff to take on this role. The Independent Chair:

- (a) must be a member of Queen Mary academic staff with experience of examining at least three UK PhDs (or equivalent for other UK awards);
- (b) may be from the same School or Institute as the student but must be from a different area in the School/Institute and not from the same research group / sub-department or unit / centre. In departments where there are no 'research team / unit' distinctions below departmental level, the Chair may be from that department as long as they have not given the student any research input or advice, for example in English and Drama;
- (c) may be from another academic department in Queen Mary;
- (d) must not have had any prior involvement with the candidate's research project or assessment, or contact with the candidate that creates a conflict of interest;
- (e) is responsible for the management of the examination process and to ensure adherence to the Academic Regulations. They provide an additional viewpoint if the conduct of the viva should become the subject of a research student appeal;
- (f) does not take part in the examination of the candidate or contribute to the discussion and decision regarding the examination outcome.

2. Responsibilities of the Independent Chair

The Independent Chair is responsible for convening the online viva meeting. They:

- a. confirm the identity of the candidate at the beginning of the viva (the student should be asked to show their Queen Mary ID card at the beginning). The supervisor may link in at the beginning of the viva to confirm the candidate's identity;
- b. test the online connection with all participants in advance of the viva (normally 24 hours in advance);
- c. decide if the online connections are satisfactory for the viva to commence on the day;
- d. if 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 that the viva must be cancelled and a new viva date must be arranged;

- e. write a brief report after the viva to:
 - i. confirm that all participants were involved in the viva;
 - ii. confirm that the examination process has been conducted with academic rigour and fairness to the candidate in line with the regulatory requirements for a doctoral award;
 - iii. record any breaks in connectivity and their duration, or other issues affecting the viva and what impact they had on the conduct of the viva and the student.
- f. make the decision to cancel the viva if any issues arise.

Checklist of actions 24 hours ahead of the viva. The Chair 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.

4. Requests process

Requests for online vivas should be made to the School/institute and require the approval of the School/Institute Director of Graduate Studies. Once everything is agreed within the School/Institute they will submit the request to the Research Degrees Office.

The Research Degrees Office will arrange approval by the appropriate Faculty Deputy Dean for Research Degrees Programmes and communicate the decision to the person co-ordinating the request for the school/institute.

The Research Degrees Office is closed. Staff are working from home. Please send email requests to your School/Institute contacts shown here

<http://www.arcs.qmul.ac.uk/research-degrees/contacts/>

RDO will log all requests for report to the Research Degrees Programmes and Examination Board every month.

Annexe A

For reference only

Standard requirements in the Academic Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes 2019-20

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

Academic Regulations

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.

ANNEXE B for RDO and staff submitting requests for remote online vivas**Template email from RDO to collect information for the request**

REQUEST FOR REMOTE PGR EXAMINATION & APPROVAL OF INDEPENDENT CHAIR

Thank you for your request for the viva for NAME to be conducted online.

Please see the attached guidance, also available at [ADD weblink]

Approval is required by the appropriate Faculty Deputy Dean for Research Degree Programmes.

When the online viva arrangements have been agreed with the student and the examiners please send me the following information using the checklist below:

- Student Name:
- Student ID:
- School / Institute
- Primary Supervisor:
- Person organising viva if not the Primary Supervisor:
- Request for examiner 1 *name* to examine remotely and from where – home / office
- Request for examiner 2 *name* to examine remotely and from where - home /office
- Reason why remote viva is requested by *both* examiners – Coronavirus situation (or indicate if other reason)
- Independent Chair appointed: Name, School/Institute and where they will attend from – home / office
- Confirmation that the student has agreed to be examined by a remote viva - attach email
- Confirmation that the DGS has agreed to this arrangement – attach email
- Confirmation from the nominated Independent Chair – attach email
- Confirmation from both examiners – attach emails

Please attach confirmation emails from the student, examiners, and the Independent Chair to your email.

I will then arrange for approval by the Faculty Deputy Dean for Research Degree Programmes

RDO Officer