University of Essex

Code of Research Degree Vivas

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1. Introduction

This Code has been produced to provide a framework of expectations and guidance to research degree candidates, examiners, and departmental colleagues on how the examination process operates, and to help ensure that the viva is conducted in a manner that is fair and consistent.

The University of Essex is committed to providing an inclusive educational learning environment for all students. If a PGR student identifies any additional support needs associated with the PGR examination process, and particularly the viva, due to their disability, specific learning differences, mental health condition, long term medical condition (or any other condition that might be eligible for additional support), they should discuss this with their supervisor, their SWIS case worker (where applicable) and make contact with the PGRE Team so that additional support, and potential reasonable adjustments, can be discussed and implemented to assist the examination process. A reasonable adjustment in this case is a change (or changes) to the viva examination arrangements that removes or reduces a disadvantage related to a disability, mental health condition, or long-term health condition.

Examiners should read this Code in conjunction with the Notes for Examiners, provided by the PGRE Team.

2. Purpose of the viva

The viva is a long-established part of the examination process for a research degree. The main focus of the assessment is on the written thesis/dissertation. However, the viva, which is the oral part of the assessment, is used to inform the examiners' final assessment decision.

The viva gives the examiners the opportunity to explore any issues in detail. Examiners may have a strong sense of the outcome from reading the thesis, but the viva gives the candidate an opportunity to defend their work, as well as to validate the thesis and demonstrate to the examiners that the candidate has completed the work themselves.

3. Viva format

Two formats are available as standard viva examination formats of the University: Video Link Vivas and In-Person Vivas.

Of central importance is ensuring that appropriate arrangements are in place for the individual PGR candidate's research/thesis assessment. We expect that considerations about the preferred viva format would be a central part of the discussions between the supervisor and candidate prior to thesis submission. The candidate may express a preference which the department should seek to

accommodate when making the viva arrangements; the person/team arranging the viva meeting should liaise with all participants and seek agreement from all parties on the viva format, starting with the candidate's preference.

4. Considerations to determine the most suitable viva format

Video Link Vivas provide the ability to expand the network of external examiners internationally as potential barriers, such as financial constraints, time commitments and our environmental efforts to reduce our carbon footprint, are removed.

There are both financial and time-saving benefits for all viva attendees, including candidates, who will not have to bear the costs of returning to campus for their viva.

The availability of both video link vivas and in-person vivas means that the most appropriate format can be sought, to support any individual needs and adjustments appropriately, including cultural and/or interpersonal challenges.

The diverse nature of some thesis and viva formats (including, but not limited to, Practice as Research examinations) are potentially not well-suited to the video link format, so this should be considered when deciding on the viva format.

Whether the viva is held in-person or by video link, it is important to ensure that the candidate understands how the examination will be conducted and is in full agreement. It is also essential to provide the best possible environment for both the candidate and the examiners, and to ensure that a suitable venue has been booked and/or that the video link used is of a high quality.

5. Viva arrangements

Candidates are advised to complete and submit an Approval of Research Degree Thesis Title form three months prior to the submission of their thesis, in order to start the appointment of examiners process. The department is responsible for nominating two examiners: one internal and one external, whose names must be approved by the Faculty Dean (Postgraduate). In the case of a staff candidate, the department must nominate two external examiners to be approved by the Faculty Dean (Postgraduate).

The internal examiner is expected to undertake any arrangements necessary for conducting the viva; however, where all parties are attending via video link, or where a staff candidate is being examined, the PGR Administrator will oversee the arrangements, including setting up the viva on Zoom.

The candidate and external examiner(s) and, where relevant, the Independent Chair, will then be contacted in due course to confirm the arrangements for the examination of the thesis. The availability of all parties should be considered when setting a viva date and time, including the Independent Chair

where applicable. The viva should normally be held no later than two months after the submission of the thesis for examination. The department should ensure that the date of the viva is communicated to the PGRE Team as soon as it is confirmed.

Candidates who fail to engage in viva arrangements, to the extent where it has not been possible to arrange a viva, shall be deemed to have withdrawn permanently from the University (and from their research degree), unless it has been agreed that the viva can be waived.

6. Waiving the viva

To request that a viva is waived, the examiners must submit details of the grounds on which they wish to excuse the candidate from the oral examination, and the Faculty Dean (Postgraduate) must approve this.

The candidate may normally only be excused from the oral examination where the viva has been arranged for a re-examination following a referral period and where the examiners are in agreement that the candidate is now in a position to pass the viva, or where there are exceptional circumstances which prevent a candidate from engaging in the viva process.

Vivas will not be waived where one or more examiners has deemed from reading the thesis that the candidate seems likely to fail, to only be eligible for a lower award or to be referred.

7. Venue (in-person vivas)

In cases where the viva is taking place in-person, the venue for the viva should normally be on campus, reasonably quiet and allow the viva to proceed without interruption.

Faculty Dean (Postgraduate)'s approval is required for a viva to be held at a venue outside the University of Essex or one of its Partner Institutions. Such requests should be made to the PGRE Team.

8. Technical preparation and support (video-link vivas)

The University recommends the use of Zoom as its preferred and supported video- conferencing software. The PGR Administrator within each Department/School will be responsible for arranging the Zoom meeting, and wherever possible a University video-conferencing room should be used.

Technical assistance will be provided by Audio Visual Services as required. This will include practical advice on the protocols of communication by video link. Time should be allowed before the start of the viva to ensure the software and equipment is working correctly, and that all parties are satisfied with the arrangement.

A suitable environment should be found by all parties, and the department must ensure that all parties have appropriate IT equipment and a confidential space to facilitate the remote viva. All parties should

have their video camera on at all times, and the use of a non-distracting virtual background is permitted.

In the event that technical issues are experienced during the viva (e.g. one or more participants are unable to connect to the Zoom room, experience audio or visual issues, or internet or software failure) all parties should seek to resolve the issues for up to 30 minutes. If a resolution has not been found after 30 minutes, the internal examiner (or Independent Chair) should end the examination, and email the relevant departmental PGR Administrator, and the PGRE Team, including all examination parties, to notify them that the viva was unable to take place, and an alternative date must be found.

9. Who attends?

The viva will normally only involve the external examiner, the internal examiner (or second external examiner) and the candidate. The Faculty Dean (Postgraduate) may appoint an Independent Chair to oversee the conduct of the oral examination in line with the Policy for the Appointment of Independent Chairs for Research Degree Vivas.

The candidate's supervisor will not normally be present at the viva. They can only be present in exceptional circumstances, to be approved on an individual basis by the Faculty Dean (Postgraduate) and with the agreement of the examiner(s). It is good practice for the supervisor to be invited to attend at the end of the viva when the examiners communicate their recommendation to the candidate. The attendance of the supervisor in these circumstances is with the permission of the examiners and the candidate.

10. Duration

The length of a viva will vary but if it is longer than two hours the internal examiner or Independent Chair will recommend an adjournment for a break.

11. Preparation by candidate

The candidate should re-read their thesis/dissertation and anticipate possible areas of questioning. They should be able to access a copy of the thesis at the viva. Their supervisor may be consulted on how to prepare for the viva and may arrange a mock viva.

Candidates can book onto the 'Preparing for the Viva' course through Proficio. The course sets out to demystify the viva process, explains what the examiners expect from the candidate and provides practical advice on how to prepare for the viva.

12. Discussion between examiners

Copies of the thesis/dissertation and examination paperwork are sent to the examiners as soon as possible following submission of the thesis to the Postgraduate Research Education Team, providing the examiners have been appointed.

The examiners must not contact nor engage in discussion with the candidate ahead of the viva, except for when making logistical arrangements. The examiners will submit independent reports on the thesis to the PGRE Team, who will exchange them between the examiners in advance of the viva.

On the day of the viva and before seeing the candidate, the examiners (and Independent Chari, if applicable) will have a pre-viva meeting, at which they will discuss their initial assessment and agreed approach to the viva, including the areas of questioning.

It is the responsibility of the internal examiner or Independent Chair to oversee the proceedings at the viva and to ensure that the University's Principal Regulations for Research Degrees are adhered to.

13. Conduct of the Viva

13.1.   Introductory remarks to candidate

The internal examiner (or Independent Chair) shall:

1. Introduce themselves and the external examiner(s)

2. Confirm the purpose of the viva

3. Explain anything the examiners have agreed about how they will proceed to conduct the viva

4. For a viva conducted via video link; confirm the etiquette for the viva, such as hand raising and what to do in the event of any technical issues

The examiners should endeavour to establish an atmosphere in which the candidate will be able to perform to the best of their ability.

13.2.   Questioning

Normally, the examiners will start with some general/introductory questions that are designed to put the candidate at their ease.

The phrasing and tone of questions should be such that the candidate is able to provide helpful clarification, and appropriate evidence and elaboration. Questioning should not be hostile or designed to 'catch the candidate out'.

13.3. Reaching a decision

Once the viva has finished, the candidate will leave the room/virtual room and the examiners will reach a decision on the recommended result. The examiners should recommend one of the outcomes listed in the University's Principal Regulations for Research Degrees (4.33). The outcome must be decided on academic grounds only; it is not the examiners' responsibility to take into account personal circumstances of the candidate, which could affect their ability to meet the timescale set by the examiners.

The candidate will be invited back into the room/virtual room to be told the recommended result and the reasons for the decision. If corrections are required the candidate should be told that they will be provided with an agreed written list of corrections to be done, which will be sent to them by the Postgraduate Research Education Team once approved by the Faculty Dean (Postgraduate).

If the examiners are unable to agree the outcome then they should advise the candidate that this is the case and that further communication shall come from the Postgraduate Research Education Team.

14. Post-Viva Paperwork

The examiners will complete the Joint Report (RD4) Form, which records the outcome of the examination, including the formal recommendation, and a List of Corrections, if required.

Once the formal recommendation has been approved by the Faculty Dean (Postgraduate), the candidate will be contacted by the Postgraduate Research Education Team to inform them of the result of the examination. The candidate will be given the opportunity to appeal this decision in accordance with the University's Progress and Appeals Procedures for Research Degree Students.

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