

## University of Essex Guidelines on the Viva Voce (Oral Examination)

These *Guidelines on the Viva* have been produced to provide information to research degree students and examiners on how the examination process operates, and to help ensure that the viva is conducted in a manner that is fair and consistent.

Within the framework set down by these Guidelines, examiners have scope to determine the most appropriate approach to the viva.

### **A. 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 student an opportunity to defend their work, as well as to validate the thesis and demonstrate to the examiners that the student has completed the work themselves.

### **B. Viva arrangements**

Students are advised to complete and submit an Approval of Research Degree Thesis Title form three months prior to the submission of their thesis, 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 Deputy Dean (Postgraduate Research Education). In the case of a staff candidate, the department must nominate three external examiners, two of which have to be approved by the Deputy Dean (Postgraduate Research Education).

The internal examiner is expected to undertake any arrangements necessary for conducting the viva. The student and external examiner will then be contacted in due course to confirm the arrangements for the examination of the thesis, including the date and time of the viva. The viva should normally be held no later than three 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.

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engage in viva arrangements, to the extent where it has not been possible to arrange a viva, shall be deemed to have withdrawn permanently from the University (and from their research degree), unless it has been agreed that the viva can be waived.

### **C. 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 Deputy Dean (Postgraduate Research Education) must approve this.

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

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

### **D. Venue**

The venue for the viva should normally be on campus, reasonably quiet and allow the viva to proceed without interruption.

The Deputy Dean (Postgraduate Research Education)'s approval is required for a viva to be held at a venue outside the University of Essex.

The Deputy Dean (Postgraduate Research Education)'s permission is also required for approval of the use of a video link, or similar. See the Conduct of Research Degree Vivas by Video Link, Skype or an equivalent audio-visual service:

<https://www.essex.ac.uk/-/media/documents/about/governance/code-practice-vivas-via-video.pdf>

### **E. Who attends?**

The viva will normally only involve the internal examiner, the external examiner and the student.

The Deputy Dean (Postgraduate Research Education) may appoint an Independent Chair, who is a senior member of the Academic or Research staff of the University of Essex, to oversee the conduct of the oral examination in line with the [Policy for the Appointment of Independent Chairs for Research Degree Vivas](#).

The student's supervisor will not normally be present at the viva. The student's supervisor can only be present in exceptional circumstances, to be approved on an individual basis by the Deputy Dean (Postgraduate Research Education) and with the agreement of the external examiner.

### **F. Duration**

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

## **G. Preparation by student**

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

Students can book onto the 'Surviving the Viva' course through [Proficio](#). The course sets out to demystify the viva process, explains what the examiners expect from the student and provides practical advice on how to prepare for the viva.

## **H. Discussion between examiners**

Copies of the thesis/dissertation and examination paperwork are sent to the examiners as soon 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 student ahead of the viva, except for when making logistical arrangements.

On the day of the viva and before seeing the student, the examiners will have a pre-viva meeting. If the examiners have not already done so, they will exchange their independent reports on the thesis and will discuss their initial assessment and agree the approach to viva, including the areas of questioning.

It is the responsibility of the internal examiner to oversee the proceedings at the viva and to ensure that the University's [Principal Regulations for Research Degrees](#) are adhered to.

## **I. Introductory remarks to student**

The internal examiner shall:

1. Introduce themselves and the external examiner
2. Confirm the purpose of the viva
3. Explain anything the examiners have agreed about how they will proceed to conduct the viva.

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

## **J. 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 student out'.

## K. Reaching a decision

Once the viva has finished, the student will leave the 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 student, which could affect their ability to meet the timescale set by the examiners.

The student will be invited back into the room to be told the recommended result and the reasons for the decision. If corrections are required the student should be told that they will be given an agreed written list of corrections to be done.

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

## L. Paperwork

The examiners will complete the Joint Report Form, which records the outcome of the examination, including the formal recommendation, and any accompanying paperwork.

Once the formal recommendation has been approved by the Deputy Dean (Postgraduate Research Education), the student will be contacted by the Postgraduate Research Education Team to inform the student of the result of the examination. The student will be given the opportunity to appeal this decision in accordance with the University's [Appeals Procedure against an Examination Decision – Postgraduate Research Students](#).

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