

GG1b - Good Practice Guidelines for Video-conference Viva Voce Examinations (COVID-19)

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Context

During the current COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting restrictions on travel and face-to-face meetings, MPhil and PhD *viva voce* examinations (hereafter ‘viva’) may be held via video-conferencing without the prior approval of Research Degrees.

This document sets out good practice guidelines for undertaking such vivas and should be read in conjunction with the relevant guidelines documents for Research Degree [Candidates](#) and [Examiners](#). The contingency arrangements outlined in this document are effective from 01 April 2020 and will remain in place until further notice.

Organising a video-conference viva

A video-conference viva may be held if:

- All parties (the nominated Examiners and Candidate) consent to undertake a viva via this method, AND
- The Examiners consent to work solely with a digital copy of the thesis

If either Examiner is not able, or content, to work solely with a digital copy of the thesis, then the examination process will be paused until such time as it is possible for a hard copy of the thesis to be officially received, logged and delivered to the Examiner.

Likewise, if a Candidate would prefer to undertake a standard, in-person viva, postponement will remain necessary until the UK government's advice on face-to-face contact is revised.

As with all vivas, it is the responsibility of the Main Supervisor to contact the Examiners and the Candidate to arrange a mutually convenient time to hold the viva. If using the assistance of a colleague (for instance, the Departmental PGR administrator) to make the pre-arrangements, please be mindful that they may not be able to assist during the examination should the Examiners or Candidates encounter technical problems.

Once a viva date has been agreed, the Supervisor is required to notify Research Degrees via email (research-degrees@gold.ac.uk) of the date.

In a remote viva setting, it is important that the identity of the candidate is verified before the examination begins. A member of Goldsmiths staff – ideally the supervisor - should undertake this task on the day of the viva. A recent photo or screenshot of the candidate, sent to the examiners by the supervisor, may be a helpful way of ensuring this. All parties will want to ensure that the email contact address for the candidate (as will be used on the video-conferencing platform) is correct.

Recommended platform

It is recommended that the Microsoft Teams platform be used for video-conference vivas. This is the College's officially supported remote meeting software and is available to all members of College. It is recommended that users download the desktop application of Teams to their PC/laptop provided they have access to it via their institution or a personal licence. The software can be downloaded via portal.office.com. Where downloading the desktop application is not possible, Teams can also be used via a browser.

If an alternative platform is preferred, this should be checked with Research Degrees in good time prior to the viva, to ensure it is acceptable and that there is sufficient time for all parties to test the platform themselves.

Good practice for all participants

No persons other than the Examiners, one Supervisor (optional), an Independent Chair (if applicable) and the Candidate may be present at a viva. This means that no one else should be present on the call, or in the rooms from which the various parties are joining the video-conferencing viva.

To ensure the examination is – as an experience - as similar as possible to a face-to-face viva, it is recommended that all participants join using video link. The candidate is **required** to use video; the Examiners may, at their discretion, use audio only.

Test the set-up (whether using MS Teams or an alternative approved system) by scheduling a video-call (Examiner to Examiner, Student to Supervisor). Check that local wifi is suitable to sustain a video call. This should ideally take place around 7 days in advance. If the connection becomes poor or intermittent the viva should at the discretion of the examiners be terminated and either resumed or restarted, at the earliest convenient date.

Ensure that a suitably quiet and private room is used, which is likely to be free of any distractions. It is also useful to have some water nearby should you need it.

Mobile phones should be turned off prior to the start of the viva, with any notifications on laptops or PCs either turned off or set to silent.

As in a standard face-to-face viva, comfort breaks should be allowed at suitable intervals, depending on the length of the viva.

Microphones should be set to mute when not speaking. This is to maximise clarity of sound and flow of the conversation. The chat function can be used while others are speaking to facilitate this as well, such as by noting comments or alerting someone of an upcoming question (“I have a point which relates to X’s last question/response which I’ll make in a minute” etc)

Recording, either via the video-conferencing platform (eg MS Teams) or via any other device, is prohibited, as is the case for a face-to-face viva, unless specifically permitted as part of a RASA.

At the end of the viva, the Examiners will, as usual, need to hold a private discussion to discuss their recommended outcome. It is recommended that the examination 'meeting' is ended at this point and that the examiners initiate a separate 'meeting' between themselves for the purpose. If they then wish informally to notify the outcome to the candidate (nb. Formal outcomes must be communicated official via Research Degrees), a new meeting

can be started with the candidate/supervisor/Independent Chair (if applicable).

[Guidance on setting up a meeting in MS Teams](#) (external site)

Reasonable Adjustments

For candidates who require any reasonable for the viva, these will be arranged, as normal, prior to the viva via email consultation between the Candidate, the Disability Service team, and Research Degrees. The additional impact of undertaking a viva remotely will also need to be considered, in order to ensure an appropriate examination experience. Any agreed adjustments will be communicated to the Examiners by Research Degrees.

If either or both of the Examiners require any reasonable adjustments, including those that may impact on the practicality of holding a viva remotely, they should contact Research Degrees for advice.

Specific advice for Examiners

Examiners will want to arrange a time for a private pre-viva discussion either via MS Teams or some other means. In addition to the normal preparatory questions prior to a viva, it is advisable to discuss how the viva will work via video-conferencing.

Examiners have the discretion to terminate a viva at any time on the following grounds:

- In the event that the Candidate becomes severely unwell;
- Where significant and recurrent technical issues arise and it is considered likely that these issues will affect the outcome of the viva;
- In the event that the Candidate makes comments to the Examiners, which put them under moral pressure, or offers any kind of incentive, to award a pass;
- In the event of a Supervisor being in attendance, where the Supervisor exceeds their role as a silent observer of the viva and attempts to influence the outcome of the examination;
- In any other circumstances which they have reason to believe will hinder the conduct of a fair and transparent examination.

At the conclusion of the viva, both examiners and the candidate should confirm that the holding of the examination by video-conference has had no substantive bearing on the examination process.

Examiners will normally comment on the conduct of the viva via their joint written report and, in this setting, should confirm that the use of video conferencing has had no substantive effect on the event that was unable to be mitigated.

Specific advice for Candidates

Although the prospect of undertaking a viva remotely may seem to introduce an added element of stress, there are steps that can be taken that will help prepare for the specifics of this kind of examination.

In addition to the general advice above regarding testing computer/software settings and wifi connections, candidates may wish to test the entire environment by holding discussions with family and/or friends prior to the event. They may also wish to discuss holding a mock remote viva with their supervisor(s).

Candidates should dress as they would have done for an in-person viva: comfortable but smart.

Candidates should be alone during the viva and the examination space and camera should be set up in such a way as to enable examiners to see that this is the case.

It is good practice to arrange a catch-up with friends to take place after the viva and to see that, as far as possible, the normal support network is available before and particularly after the event, even if they cannot be physically nearby.

In terms of the content of the viva, candidates should aim to prepare as they would for any examination. Try to stay calm, take time to consider responses and do not be afraid to ask examiners to repeat questions if they have not been fully heard, nor to ask for clarification if it is needed.

Many candidates (and indeed examiners) will find that the dynamic of speaking via video-conferencing makes it slightly harder to pick up on the body language of others. Candidates should try not to be distracted by this and should instead focus on the points they wish to make and on how best to respond to the content of questions.

Specific advice for Independent Chairs

Where there is an independent chair appointed for an examination, their role will in many respects remain as it would for a face-to-face viva.

Examiners will need to hold discussion purely between themselves prior to (as well as after) the viva. Chairs should agree with Examiners whether and when they will be needed – other than during the viva itself – but, in any case, should hold an introductory discussion with the Examiners before the viva commences.

The advice to all other parties regarding checking the technical set-up prior to the event applies equally to any Chair and it will be particularly important that they mute their microphone during any periods in which they are not speaking.

It is also worthwhile agreeing with Examiners how the viva will be started/ended, an order for introductions and specifically what will happen between the end of the viva and when the candidate is notified of the recommended outcome. As it will not – as in an in-person viva - be possible to ‘summon’ the candidate, starting promptly and/or having a means to contact the candidate will be particularly important.

Although Independent Chairs are not routinely expected to provide a report to Research Degrees, it is good practice to take brief notes on proceedings. It will be particularly important, wherever there are any issues pertaining to video-conferencing, that there is confirmation of how these issues were mitigated. These should then be reported to Research Degrees.

In the event of technical difficulties, or if there is any other reason (as outlined in the Examiner guidance above) to terminate the viva, an Independent Chair – where present – will normally take the initiative.

Questions or queries

If you have any questions about research degree submissions or examinations, please contact us via email on research-degrees@gold.ac.uk

Document history

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|---------|------------|---------|--------------|----------|
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