

Solent University supplementary regulations on viva voce and guidance for research degrees during the Covid-19 outbreak

The University recognises that doctoral viva examinations and transfer panels may be disrupted during this time of altered work and travel practices due to Covid-19. For viva and transfers that are due in the short term, the University regulations do allow for remote attendance using online platforms.

A guiding principle for the University is that the best interests of our students are served. Therefore, any decision about continuing or delaying a viva / transfer panel will be done in full consultation with our students and offer them choice about whether to proceed or postpone their viva.

The University is aware that not all doctoral students will be comfortable with a remote meeting format, and students may elect to request a delayed examination. Similarly, those of our students who are engaged in practice based research, and who may be partially submitting non-textual work, will be able to review whether an online format examination will be appropriate in their case. It is recommended that students maintain close contact with their supervision team to discuss the most appropriate way forward.

For viva examinations which are imminent, the University may be supportive of short-term postponements in order to give time for appropriate alternative arrangements to be made in line with this guidance.

The University will contact all parties (candidate, internal and external examiners, independent chair, supervisory teams) as soon as possible to discuss arrangements in order to determine whether the candidate wishes to postpone until a face-to-face examination may be arranged or to proceed with a remote viva format. The University will confirm that all parties are willing and able to use alternative arrangements (video/online technologies). In the event that an examiner is unfamiliar, uncomfortable, or unwilling to engage with online formats, but the candidate wishes to proceed, there may need to be a period of postponement while the supervision team seek an examiner with commensurate experience who is able to engage with an online viva format. Requests to alter an approved examination panel should be submitted on the usual forms with all required supporting evidence.

All parties should be involved in and agree whether the viva should run at the previously agreed date and time using alternative arrangements, or whether to postpone briefly to enable organisational and logistical adjustments to be made to support a viva using alternative arrangements, or to postpone to a later date, yet to be determined, when the current restrictions on movement no longer apply.

In the event that there is a need to conduct the viva using alternative methods, this guidance should be followed.

1. Arrangements for conducting a viva / panel using alternative online arrangements:
 - All parties (candidate, external examiners, internal examiner, independent chair, one supervisor if requested by candidate) must confirm that they agree to the viva/oral examination being conducted remotely using video/online methods and

that those who are to participate in this manner have suitable equipment with both audio and video) and a private location available, which can be free of distractions.

- The candidate must be aware that if they agree to proceed with the viva using video/online methods, the method/format cannot be used as grounds for a later appeal.
- No recordings of the examination must take place by any party; no evidence based on recordings of the viva will be permissible in any appeal process.
- The viva should be scheduled at a time that is reasonable to the time zone in which the candidate is located.
- An independent chair will chair the viva but not take a role in the decision making as per the University's regulations. However, the independent chair may elect to bring the viva to a close where they consider either that technological failures or the format of the viva is acting to the detriment of the candidate's ability to respond effectively to the examiners. This may be recorded as a viva 'without outcome' and the viva may be reconvened at such time as either the technological failures have been overcome, or when a face-to-face examination format is possible.
- All parties to the viva must share an alternative method of communication e.g. telephone or email, which will allow for the Independent Chair to continue communication with examiners and the candidate in the event of a technology failure during the viva.
- A candidate who is located remotely and is currently resident with friends or family can exceptionally during this period nominate a friend or family member to have as a supporter/observer present with them for the viva, either for the entire viva, or for the communication of the decision of the examiners. This individual is not allowed to contribute in any way to the conduct of the viva and must be introduced at the start. If the supporter/observer is unable to maintain silence during the viva, the independent chair may elect to pause or curtail the viva and can require the viva to continue without the supporter/observer if they persist. This provision acknowledges the very particular circumstances of the present outbreak of Coronavirus and the strains that restrictions to everyday life may contribute to the wellbeing of students undertaking the viva during this time.
- Candidates may elect to invite the director of studies or another member of the supervisory team to be present as the observer attending the viva remotely. If the supervisor is present remotely, the candidate may also elect to have a supporter who is physically present attend. The supervisor is not allowed to contribute in any way to the conduct of the viva.
- While the candidate is not required to invite a supervisor to be present during the viva, the University recommends that a member of the supervisory team be available after the viva to support the student. Examinations, irrespective of outcome can be challenging experiences and having access to a support system to process and share in the outcome is an important consideration for any examination. This will be especially important where a student is currently domiciled alone, or does not wish to call upon their co-residents for support.
- The University will notify the supervisory team of the viva outcome if a member of the supervisory team was not present for the viva or for the communication of the examiners' decision so that the team are able to offer guidance to the candidate immediately following the examination.

2. Technology

- It is recommended that the viva be conducted via Skype; however, consideration can be given to other applications, especially if the participants are more familiar with these, subject to any licensing restrictions. If there are good grounds on which no agreement on a common platform/application can be reached, the viva should be postponed.
- Each online viva must be preceded by a test session with a 'tech host' provided by the university where each participant will have a trial run to confirm they are able to connect, to open and close video connections and mute and unmute audio, etc. If a satisfactory level of video or audio cannot be achieved during the test meeting, the viva will be postponed.
- The technology must support video and audio connections and as part of agreeing to conduct the viva remotely all the parties must confirm that they have relevant equipment and that their location offers facility to be plugged in to maintain battery life for the duration of the viva.
- The viva must commence using both video and audio, however, video does not have to be maintained by all parties throughout. For instance, the Chair may not require video throughout and it should be noted that maintaining active video engagement may be difficult if there is also a need to simultaneously consult an online version of the thesis.
- A 'tech host' should be available throughout for the Independent Chair to refer to if a technical issue arises. If there is a failure in the connection/technology attempts should be made to reconnect. In the event of a serious or protracted breakdown in the connection or quality of the connection for more than 20 minutes the Chair should halt the viva and may record a result of 'without outcome' pending rescheduling of the viva. If it is clear before 20 minutes are up that the re-connection cannot be made or is unlikely, the viva should be halted earlier.
- The decision as to whether to halt a viva should be made by the Independent Chair. However, the criteria making the decision as to whether a viva is postponed, re-convened or concluded is covered below.

3. Before the viva

- Exceptionally during this period students will not be required to submit their thesis in bound printed copies as well as electronically. Submission of both a Word and a Pdf version must be completed electronically by the submission deadline along with the required elements (declaration form and Turnitin sign off) as set out in the [Doctoral Student Handbook](#).
- The external and internal examiners' separate preliminary reports must have been submitted to research.degree@solent.ac.uk a week in advance of the viva. These will be shared with the Chair and examiners by the research office in advance of the viva.
- Any presentation that the candidate has been requested to make as part of the viva must have been sent in advance to research.degree@solent.ac.uk and will be shared with the Chair. The 'tech host' will ensure that the presentation is viewable by all participants when the viva commences. It is not intended that the examiners or chair should preview or in any way assess the presentation before the viva.

4. During the viva

- The purpose of the viva and its conduct should remain as per the University's *Regulations for Postgraduate Research Degrees*.
- If the viva must be halted due to a breakdown in connection or quality of the connection the Independent Chair should consult with the examiners via an alternative method (e.g. telephone). The examiners should advise the Chair whether they feel the viva sufficiently advanced and sufficient discussion had taken place by the point of the communication loss that further examination would not change their ability to make a decision on the viva outcome. In arriving at such a conclusion, the examiners should take into account the requirements and outcomes of a doctoral degree, and not the extent to which they had covered the contents of the thesis. If the examiners are not in agreement on this point, the Independent Chair should record a decision of viva halted 'without outcome' and the viva should be rescheduled. If the examiners are in agreement that the viva was not sufficiently advanced to enable them to make a decision, the same outcome should be recorded. The Independent Chair must communicate the outcome of this decision to the candidate as soon as possible.

5. Examiner discussion

- All vivas begin with a pre-meeting between examiners chaired by the independent chair. This meeting usually takes no more than half an hour and is not attended by the candidate or their invited observer/supporter. The time of the preliminary meeting should be communicated to examiners and should take place as a separate meeting to the viva.
- In order that examiners can discuss the candidate's performance, the examiners and independent chair will leave the video conference and reconvene in a separate meeting. The candidate and observer (if any) should be advised how they will be contacted to invite them back into the online viva meeting and given an approximate time when this will happen.
- A separate meeting invite should be circulated to facilitate the preliminary and post viva discussion space and the 'tech host' may be applied to, to coordinate this.
- The independent chair must be party to the post viva discussion to ensure that any decisions are based solely on the candidate's performance and do not reflect issues related to the format of the viva in addition to providing guidance on the university's regulations pertaining to viva examinations.

6. Communication of the decision

- The candidate should be contacted and invited to re-join the online viva meeting. They may be accompanied by an observer/supporter. If invited by the candidate, the supervisor should be invited to re-join the online meeting too.
- Candidates should be informed of the outcome of their examination as soon as possible. The possible outcomes and procedures to be followed are the same as for standard viva. Email confirmation to research.degree@solent.ac.uk may be accepted in lieu of physical examiner and chair signatures on the required forms.
- The communication of outcomes should be sensitive to the fact that the examination is a significant culmination of the candidate's work and that the normal

support and activities surrounding this rite of passage are likely to be disrupted when the examination is in a different location to the examiners and chair.

7. The responsibilities of the Independent Chair are to

- Preside over the viva proceedings in order to ensure consistency between different vivas and particularly to ensure consistency in the conduct of vivas using video/online format as compared to those conducted on location in normal circumstances
- Ensure that any post viva decisions and comments are based solely on the candidate's performance and do not reflect any issues related to the online format of the viva.
- Provide an additional viewpoint through their chair's report for reference if the conduct of the viva should become the subject of a student appeal
- Confirm that all parties are comfortable with the online arrangements and that the candidate and the examiners can see and hear each other clearly
- Liaise with the 'tech host' at the start of the meeting and at any appropriate stage during the viva to ensure the quality of the connection is maintained.
- Make clear the expectations indicating the likely duration, the ability of the candidate and examiners to request brief breaks if necessary, and ensuring that all parties have everything to hand that they require.
- Actively monitor the quality of the connection, and in the case of occasional breakdowns/pauses in either the video or audio link ensure that any discussion is repeated and that no misunderstanding has occurred.
- Make the decision about whether the viva continues in the event of a serious or protracted breakdown of the connection of more than 20 minutes. However, if it is clear before 20 minutes are up that a re-connection cannot be made the viva should be postponed and 'without outcome' recorded, except where examiners are agreed that the viva was sufficiently advanced that a decision can be made as outlined above.
- Observe during the viva if the candidate experienced difficulties in responding whether this was due to their understanding or due to the technology/format being used and record this in their chair's report.

In addition, as standard for vivas the Chair should:

- Verify the candidate's identity if this cannot be done by the internal examiner or supervisor if present, or if there is no internal examiner present (in the case of staff examinations).
- Ensure that any presentation to be made by the candidate has been circulated to examiners such that they can follow the presentation online.
- Confirm that all parties have completed a test call with the 'tech host' separately ahead of the viva
- Collect and hold telephone numbers or other format of direct communication with the participants for effective communication in case the viva has to be halted for technical reasons.
- Confirm that all parties to the viva are in a suitable and comfortable location where they will not be disturbed

- Put all parties at ease, particularly in light of the nature of the situation and the format of the viva
- Ensure that the duration of the viva is not excessive, especially in light of the format
- Ensure that the candidate has appropriate follow up after the viva with their supervisory team and/or other supporter.