

Research Degrees: Guidance for Staff on the Modality of Final Thesis Research Degree *Vivas*

This document is for supervisors, Directors of Postgraduate Studies (DPSs) and internal examiners. It provides guidance on considering the option for a remote final thesis *viva* and where approved, how to support students undertaking a remote *viva*.

1. Policy

1.1 The College policy states:

Research degree final vivas are expected to take place on-site and in person, but remote or hybrid vivas may be considered in the following circumstances:

- a) *Where travel makes it difficult for the external examiners or student to attend the examination.*
- b) *Where the appointment of an external examiner who is an international leading expert in the field would be of great benefit to the student and the Department, but there are considerable travel expenses and/or travel carbon emissions associated with the appointment.*
- c) *Where examiners or students have concerns about attending an in-person final thesis viva due to their own medical condition, or the medical condition of an individual they are living with or caring for.*
- d) *Where circumstances beyond the control of either the student or the examiners means that an in-person on-campus viva needs to be re-scheduled at short notice. Such examples may include natural events such as adverse weather, industrial action, or civil disturbances.*

The case to hold a remote or hybrid final thesis viva requires student consent and must be approved by the DPS.

2. Guidance on considering a student's request for a remote *viva*

2.1 Examination Entry should be initiated by the student through MyImperial at least four months before the anticipated date of submission of the thesis. At this stage, supervisors should discuss with their student the mode of delivery for the final thesis *viva*. Once the supervisor and student reach an agreement on the mode of delivery for the student's final thesis *viva*, supervisors can nominate examiners accordingly.

2.2 In consideration of a student's request for a remote *viva*, supervisors should, in addition to the criteria set out in the policy, consider whether the student has access to appropriate technology to support the remote examination and a suitable venue for the duration of the examination. Where a student does not have access to either, their request for a remote *viva* would not normally be approved. However, there could be exceptional circumstances where a remote *viva* is in the best interest of the student, but they do not have access to

appropriate technology or suitable venue. Where this is the case, the supervisor should discuss with their department whether support can be provided to the student. However, it is acknowledged that this may not always be possible, especially if the student is abroad. A case-by-case approach will be needed to determine the best course of action.

- 2.3 Where students are making a case based on their own medical reasons (physical or mental health reasons), they may submit evidence in support of their request, but this is not mandatory. They could also submit a statement of support from their Senior Tutor (PGR), but again this is not mandatory. Supervisors are free to seek advice from the College's support services as to whether a remote *viva* or other reasonable adjustments are the best way to support the student. However, supervisors should not identify the student when seeking advice, unless the student has given prior permission to do so.
- 2.4 Where supervisors do not support their student's request for a remote *viva*, students can submit their request to their DPS. The DPS will consider the case and ask the supervisor for their perspective on why the request for a remote *viva* was not supported. If the DPS supports the student, they shall inform the supervisor that a remote *viva* will be scheduled. If the DPS does not support a student's request, students can appeal, within 5 working days, via the Head of Department who will make the final decision. Departments should make it clear to students how they can submit an appeal to their Head of Department and when they can expect to receive a decision from the Head of Department. Where the Head of Department does not approve the student's request for a remote *viva*, the student will be expected to attend an in-person *viva*. Students should then initiate exam entry through MyImperial.
- 2.5 Students may also choose not to submit their request for a remote *viva* to their supervisor. Instead, they could submit their request directly to their DPS. In such cases, the DPS will confirm the agreed mode of delivery to the supervisor and the student can initiate exam entry through MyImperial.
- 2.6 If students decide to initiate exam entry through MyImperial having not previously discussed their preferred mode of delivery of their *viva* with their supervisor or Department, it will be assumed that the *viva* will take place in-person and arrangements will proceed on that basis.

3. Changing circumstances

- 3.1 It is acknowledged that student or examiner personal circumstances could change during the exam entry process, and it could be necessary to switch to a remote or hybrid *viva*.
- 3.2 If the student has access to suitable technology and an appropriate venue in which to sit the exam remotely and gives their consent to switch to a remote exam, then this can be arranged. Where the student does not have access to suitable technology and/or an appropriate venue in which to sit the exam, but they give their consent to proceed with a hybrid examination, then the Department should make arrangements to provide these to the student so that the examination can proceed. Ultimately, students retain the right to an in-person examination if that is their preference and this could mean re-scheduling the *viva*.

4. Departmental requests for a remote or hybrid *viva*

- 4.1 Where supervisors and DPSs determine that the student would benefit from the expertise of an international examiner, but an in-person *viva* would be extremely difficult to arrange, or where the appointment comes with significant travel expense and cost to the environment through travel carbon emissions, a remote or hybrid *viva*, can be proposed to the student. However, student consent must be sought, and students retain the right to have an in-person *viva* if that is their preference.

5. Examiner requests for remote/hybrid *vivas*

- 5.1 As part of the examiner appointment process, internal and external examiners will be informed of the Department's agreed mode of delivery for the *viva*. Examiners can accept (or not) the appointment on the basis of the mode of *viva* presented to them. They may also request a hybrid *viva*. Where this is the case, DPS should seek the consent of the student before proceeding. If the student is happy to proceed with a remote or hybrid *viva*, and they have access to a suitable venue and technology to support the *viva*, then a remote *viva* can be arranged. Where the student does not have access to a suitable venue or technology, then the department should provide these.

- 5.2 Where a student's preference is for an in-person *viva*, then a new examiner will need to be appointed. Where this occurs during the examiner appointment stage of the exam entry process, DPSs will be able to reject the original examiner nomination through MyImperial and a new examiner can be nominated. If this happens towards the end of the exam entry process, then the Registry will re-activate the examiner nomination fields within MyImperial and these will become available to supervisors once again.

6. Supporting Students Undertaking a Remote or Hybrid Final Thesis Examination: Guidance for Departments, Supervisors and Internal Examiners

- 6.1 Where the Department has approved a student's request for a remote *viva*, then it will be important to provide students with appropriate preparation.

6.2 Pre-*Viva* Preparation

6.2.1 Digital considerations

It is important to recognise that some students may not have access to the same technology as staff or other students. When a student requests a remote *viva* or agrees to a hybrid *viva* to facilitate the appointment of an international examiner, supervisors and the Director of Postgraduate Studies should check that the student has access to suitable technology in which to support the remote examination. If a remote or hybrid *viva* is approved by the Department, but the student does not have suitable technology in place for the examination, the Department should make this available.

Before choosing which software to use for the exam, supervisors should review ICT's webpages regarding the use of Microsoft Teams and Zoom: [When to use Zoom or Teams | Administration and support services | Imperial College London](#)

Where a remote or hybrid *viva* is proceeding, supervisors should check that all participants (the student and examiners) are familiar with the chosen software/platform and determine whether training on its use is required prior to the *viva*.

Please note that final thesis *vivas* should not be recorded.

6.2.2 Arranging a mock *viva*

It is good practice for supervisors to arrange a mock remote *viva*. A mock *viva* is an opportunity for students to carry out a “tech check,” a chance to practice using the software ahead of the examination and to familiarise themselves with the process.

6.2.3 Supporting the welfare of students

When considering a student’s request for a remote *viva*, or if the Department is considering a hybrid *viva*, the mental health and wellbeing of the student should be considered a priority. If the Department has concerns about the outcome of the examination and/or the physical and mental health of the student, a remote or hybrid *viva* should only be arranged if it is in the overall best interest of the student to do so. In such cases, the Senior Tutor (PGR) or Student Wellbeing Adviser must be available to support the student both pre and post *viva*. Departments may also need to seek advice from Student Support Services, as appropriate.

At the pre-*viva* meeting, the internal examiner should work with the external examiner(s) to agree a schedule of breaks throughout the *viva*. It is recommended that a short 5-minute break is offered every hour.

6.2.4 Reasonable adjustments

It may also be necessary to make reasonable adjustments to the conduct of the examination to take account of students with disabilities or specific learning needs. Departments should seek advice from the College’s Disability Advisory Service and/or their Departmental Disability Officer.

6.2.5 Timing and location of the *viva*

When arranging the remote/hybrid *viva*, supervisors and/or Departments should consider where the student and examiners are based geographically when setting the time(zone) for the examination.

6.3 **Pre-*viva* meeting for examiners**

In the usual way and prior to the *viva*, examiners should exchange their preliminary written reports. In the case of a remote/hybrid *viva*, a pre-*viva* meeting between the examiners is important. The internal examiner should take the lead on setting this up.

In addition to the examiners discussing their initial impressions of the thesis, identifying whether they need to raise any queries with the student’s main supervisor and agreeing the questions they wish to ask the student during the examination, the examiners should also decide how to manage practicalities for the remote/hybrid exam. This should include:

- implementation of any reasonable adjustments.
- a procedure for the end of the *viva* that mirrors the normal procedure where the student leaves the room so the examiners can discuss the outcome and then returns to hear the outcome. Before everyone logs off, all participants should know exactly what will happen next, including the timescale for the student to receive the examiners' report and how feedback, such as minor corrections, will be provided to the student remotely.
- a procedure to follow should the student become distressed, or the examiners are concerned for the welfare of the student. In such cases, it is suggested that the internal examiner has available the contact details of the supervisor and the Department's Senior Tutor (PGR) and/or Student Wellbeing Adviser. The internal examiner should also consider the College's [Student Support Zone](#) which provides helpful information about how to raise concerns about the welfare of students.
- schedule of breaks.
- a process which enables participants to remain in contact with each other in the event of technology failure.

[A template agenda for the pre-*viva* meeting between examiners is attached as **Appendix 1**.]

6.4 At the *viva*

Usually, the internal examiner should set up the *viva* examination including managing entry to the online meeting, setting up virtual waiting rooms and ensuring that the exam is conducted under appropriate conditions.

ID verification - Imperial requires all participants to show their ID cards at the start of the examination. Webcams should remain on throughout the duration of the examination.

Wellbeing - Examiners should check on the wellbeing of the student before the *viva* starts and ensure that they have access to water and any other necessary supplies. They should suspend the *viva* and ask about the student's wellbeing if they notice the student becoming distressed at any point. They should be particularly sensitive to the wellbeing of the student when the outcome of the examination is delivered.

Briefing on the examination – Examiners should have agreed, at their pre-meeting, the practicalities for how the examination will be conducted, including the schedule of breaks. These should be communicated to the student at the start of the *viva*.

Regardless of the outcome, students should be congratulated on completing their *viva* examination (and hopefully on the result) and, in cases where the outcome may not be as positive as they'd hoped, establish that the student has a friend or family member that they can talk to (or that the supervisor/Senior Tutor (PGR) is on call to support, if necessary).

Appendix 1: Template agenda for examiner pre-*viva* meeting

1. Welcome and introductions
2. Discussion of preliminary written reports:
 - discussion of initial impressions of the thesis
 - identification of whether any queries need to be raised with the student's main supervisor
 - agreement of questions to ask the student during the examination and who will ask them
 - a process for how to intervene should a new question occur
3. Are any reasonable adjustments needed for the examination to support the student?
4. Procedure for the end of the *viva*:
 - A procedure should be developed that mirrors the usual procedure where the student leaves the room so the examiners can discuss the outcome and then returns to hear the outcome. For example, the student (and supervisor if present) could be asked to move into the virtual waiting room and then return when the outcome is agreed.
 - Before everyone logs off, all participants should know exactly what will happen next, including the timescale for the student to receive the examiners' report and how feedback, such as minor corrections, will be provided to the student remotely.
 - Whatever procedure is decided here needs to be communicated to the student at the start of their examination as part of your briefing.
5. Procedure to follow should the student become distressed:
 - It is suggested that the internal examiner has available the contact details of the supervisor and the Department's Senior Tutor (PGR) or Student Wellbeing Adviser to hand. The College's [Student Support Zone](#) provides helpful information should the examiners become concerned about the welfare of a student.
6. Frequency of breaks and how these will be managed
7. Technology failure – agree how participants will remain in contact with each other.
8. Agree the briefing note to the student – this should summarise what has been agreed during discussion of points 4-7 of this agenda and a reminder to all participants that *vivas* should not be recorded.