Viva Voce or Oral Examination Policy: Guidance note on use of videoconferencing

When the exceptional circumstances are known

1. The expectation remains that all in viva voce examinations for research degrees will take place at a City site with the candidate, examiners and chair all present in person.
2. If the preferred external examiner cannot conduct the viva voce examination, and this is known typically within three months of thesis submission, an alternative examiner should be appointed.
3. If the preferred external examiner does not have the right to work in the UK/EU, and videoconferencing is being proposed to avoid the administrative burden of a Permitted Paid Engagement visa, an alternative examiner should be appointed.
4. Exceptional and unforeseen circumstances may include, but are not limited to:
   a. Health difficulties preventing travel (e.g. broken leg of the external examiner);
   b. Inclement weather (e.g. heavy snowfall, flooding);
   c. Acts of god (e.g. volcanic eruption).
5. Under such circumstances, the Chair of the viva should inform the relevant Associate Dean of the request to hold the viva by videoconferencing and spell out briefly those circumstances. The Associate Dean would then normally respond and if so minded approve the exceptional circumstances and record this on an e-mail (all correspondence cc’ed to the Dean of the School and the Dean of the City Graduate School). In the absence of the Associate Dean, the request should be made to the Dean of the School or the Dean of the City Graduate School for approval of the exceptional circumstances. The approval of the student to hold the viva by videoconferencing should be confirmed in the e-mail.
6. Approval of videoconferencing will typically be granted for the external examiner only; use for any other participant will be considered on a case by case basis.
7. The Chair of the viva should book a suitable room for the conduct of the viva. It is the School’s responsibility to ensure IT equipment is functioning correctly. The recommended room is AG02, College Building (on the advice of timetabling), if available, in view of the facilities available and proximity to technical support.

On the day of the viva

8. The Chair of the viva should check the video link to the remote person (R) e.g. the external examiner within half an hour of the scheduled start of the viva. If any problems are experienced, contact with the appropriate technical support should be made to enable the viva to start on time. The Chair should ask for a telephone number on which the remote person could be called, to be used in the case of a problem with the video link and an e-mail address.
9. At the start of the viva the remote person (R) and those in the room should introduce themselves. It is the Chair’s responsibility to ensure that, at the start of the viva, all are comfortable with the arrangements and that the student and the examiners can see and hear each other clearly.
10. The viva should then proceed as normal.
11. Breakdowns in communication:

   a. The Chair should monitor the viva carefully to note if there are any occasional breakdowns in either the video or the audio link to the remote person (R). Should this happen the Chair should ask those concerned to repeat any comments and ensure that no misunderstanding has occurred.

   b. If a severe breakdown in communication occurs, due to technical difficulties at either end, the Chair should seek as far as possible to resolve them e.g. by calling Technical Services at City or terminating and reconnecting the video link. If the communication failure is problematic in the long term, the Chair should ask for a break and advise the student to leave (if the student it at City) while technical problems are sorted out in the room at City or at the remote location.

   c. If the video link cannot readily be reconnected, the Chair should attempt to continue the viva using audio alone e.g. using the service provider or if necessary by telephone (whilst attempting to regain video connection).

   d. If communication breaks down catastrophically, at the Chair's discretion, the viva can be suspended for a short period while work is done to re-establish communication. E-mail/telephone should be used between the Chair and the remote person (R) to try to communicate and solve the problems occurring. However, if there is no consistent video or audio connection between the remote person and City e.g. for a period of half an hour or more, the Chair should ask the student (if contactable) and the examiners at City if they wish to continue with the viva. If video and audio communication still fail to be reliable, the Chair should decide that the viva should be suspended. If this situation occurs, the Chair should note the circumstances on the Chair's briefing form and e-mail the Associate Dean about the circumstances.

   e. The Chair should then work with all concerned to find a new date/time for the viva, seeking to ensure as far as possible that the problems would not recur. The viva should then continue, with the Chair giving a briefing at the start on the progress with the viva prior to the breakdown in communications.

12. The examiners' recommendations and report should be developed in the usual way through the video link and outcomes of the viva should be reported to the student in the normal way.

13. Having consented to the use of video link, candidates will not normally be permitted to use this as grounds for appeal, unless technical issues or other unforeseen eventualities are deemed to have significantly affected the candidate's performance and are noted in the examiners'/chairs report. If there are any concerns on the part of the candidate in conducting the examination in this way, then the examination should be rearranged and not proceed by videoconferencing.

14. If additional costs have been encountered on the part of the examiners, this can be expensed up to the usual limits.

15. The Dean of City Graduate School should be notified once all instances of videoconferencing have taken place in order that statistics can be reported in the Annual Report of Graduate School activity to Senate.

Approved by Senate
July 2019