COVID-19: Undertaking MPhil/PhD Upgrades and Viva Examinations using Videoconferencing

Practical Guidance for Staff, Candidates and Examiners

In response to COVID-19, the University has had to move rapidly from a position of using videoconferencing as a matter of exception to one where this is the norm. This document sets out principles and recommended processes for use across the University during the current period of disruption. It is intended that these arrangements will remain in place until further notice.

Principles

1. Examination using videoconferencing will only take place with the consent of all parties (candidate, examiners, Chair) agreed in advance. Where consent is not forthcoming, the examination should be postponed. If postponement extends over three months beyond the thesis submission date, advice should be sought from the Doctoral College.

2. Some theses, in view of their format, (e.g. music compositions or performance, complex diagrams) may be difficult or impossible to examine using videoconferencing. The view of the External Examiner should determine if the examination can proceed.

3. For MPhil to PhD transfer only, consideration should be given to postponement in the first instance if the current disruption is anticipated to end before the student’s 18th (FT)/24th (PT) month of enrolment. Otherwise, use of videoconferencing should be pursued. Unlike viva examinations, MPhil/PhD upgrades conducted via videoconferencing do not need approval from the Doctoral College.

4. Colleagues are recommended to use Microsoft Teams for videoconferencing but are advised to be prepared to use alternative software such as Skype, Google Hangouts or Zoom in the unlikely event of service disruption.

Preparation

5. For all videoconferencing examinations, it is advisable to use an experienced Chair who is sufficiently familiar with City’s academic regulations that the examination process can be led with confidence.

6. If videoconferencing is being used for an exam, consent must be sought from all parties by the Course Officer. Where this is not possible, the examination should be postponed, albeit with due consideration for the impact on the candidate.

7. The Course Officer must complete a Qualtrics pro-forma (available here) to notify the Doctoral College of the intention to use videoconferencing. In current circumstances, approval can be assumed and will be confirmed by the Doctoral College by return of email (this step is important for reporting purposes to Senate and thus for the integrity of the examination process).

8. The Course Officer will establish the date and time for the examination, considering the location and time differences of the participants. The Course Officer should also collate contact details (email addresses/Skype IDs) and circulate to participants for use in an emergency.

9. The Course Officer should send an Outlook calendar invitation to all participants and first supervisor, setting the location as a Microsoft Teams call. The Course Officer should check that all participants have the chosen videoconferencing software downloaded and set up.

10. It is recommended that the Chair tests the connection with all parties, several hours prior to the examination commencing.
Examination Procedure

11. Should there be any technical difficulties, IT Support are available on 020 7040 8181. If such technical difficulties compromise the fair running of the examination at any point, the Chair should abort the examination and reschedule with the support of the Course Officer.

12. The examination process should emulate a face-to-face examination as much as possible: the examiners and Chair should have a preliminary meeting using videoconferencing to consider their preliminary reports (for viva examinations) before the candidate joins the proceedings.

13. **During the upgrade/viva**, the candidate should only have with them a copy of the upgrade documents/thesis and their computer (plus necessary refreshments). Most importantly, no other people should be present in any of the spaces being used by participants in the examination.

14. Only the candidate, examiners, Chair and supervisor (where applicable) should be involved in the videoconference.

15. The Chair should confirm with the participants that each is comfortable with the examination conditions before the substantive element of the upgrade/viva examination begins.

16. The Chair should remove the candidate from the videoconference and carry out the normal procedure of chairing the decision making. Once the examiners have reached their decision, the Chair will reconnect with the candidate in order that the decision can be communicated orally by the examiners, if this is how they intend to proceed.

17. All written documentation should be collated as normal and emailed to the Course Officer. The Examiners’ Joint Report and Chair’s Report, using standard report templates, must make explicit reference to use of videoconferencing and any impact this had on the examination process.

18. The Chair will make clear to the candidate that having agreed to a viva voce examination involving video conferencing they will not be permitted to use this as grounds for appeal, unless the circumstances of technical failure or other unforeseen eventualities beyond the control of the examiners were deemed to have adversely affected their performance.

Support

19. For advice or support on particular cases, Schools are welcome to contact the City Doctoral College (doctoralcollege@city.ac.uk) at any time.

*This document builds upon the University’s existing policy for MPhil/PhD viva examinations and guidance on use of videoconferencing for this purpose; this document supersedes existing guidance during this period of disruption in relation to COVID-19 where there is conflict.*