

Guidance Notes for Research Degree Examinations

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1. Introduction

These notes have been produced principally to guide examiners through the process of examination for research degrees at Sheffield Hallam University. They may also be useful for research degree candidates preparing for examination, and for supervisors making the arrangements for the oral assessment (i.e., viva voce) part of the examination.

These notes are offered as suggested good practice for the conduct of research degree examinations and should be read in conjunction with the University's Research Degree Regulations. Regulatory requirements – which must be satisfied - are indicated by references in bold (e.g., **R10.1**) to the relevant section of the Research Degrees Regulations. Copies of the full regulations are available on the [Research Degrees](#) web page of the Rules and Regulations page of the university's website, or by contacting the Doctoral School via rdcadmin@shu.ac.uk.

Sections of the Regulations which are particularly relevant to examination are:

Regulation	Topic
R1.4	Research Masters' Award Objectives
R1.5	Doctoral Award Objectives
R4.9	Practice-based Doctorates
R4.10	Treatment of Scholarly Work
R9	Examinations – General
R10	Preparation for the Examination
R11	The Candidate's Responsibilities in the Examination
R12	Thesis
R13	Examiners
R14	First Examination
R15	Re-examination
R16	Appeals Against the Recommendations of the Examiners

Further advice on any aspect of the University's regulations and procedures governing the examination of research degree candidates may be obtained from the Doctoral School Team at rdcadmin@shu.ac.uk.

2. Size, composition and approval of the examination team

A candidate must be examined by at least two and normally not more than three examiners, of whom at least one must be an external examiner. The examining team must have suitable experience and expertise, be unbiased, and be clearly independent of the supervisor, of the student, and of each other in order that no conflicts of interest arise.

Where the candidate and the internal examiner are both on the staff of the same organisation, a second external examiner must be appointed.

It is the responsibility of the candidate's Director of Studies to informally approach examiners to establish their willingness to act, subject to formal approval by the University's Research Degrees Committee. A current CV is required from the proposed external examiner. This approval is sought using the RF3 Form: Application for Approval of the Examiners and Thesis Title, which should be submitted for approval no less than 4 months before the expected date of thesis submission.

Full information and the criteria for choosing suitable examiners are in the Research Degree Regulations section **R13**.

3. Stages of the examination

The examination for a research degree has two stages: the submission and preliminary assessment of the thesis, and then its defence by oral examination.

Examiners are required to submit preliminary reports on the standard of the thesis, at least one week before the scheduled date for the oral examination. Form RF5M/D *Examiner's Preliminary Report and Recommendation on a Candidate for the Degree of Masters' or Doctorate* is used for this purpose. The Doctoral School Team will forward these reports to all members of the examining team and the independent Chair prior to the day of the viva.

4. The thesis

The thesis must comply with the University's regulations – see **R12**. The thesis may be either:

- **Monograph style:** this is the conventional thesis style where the work is laid out as a series of chapters, typically having the following structure: introduction, literature review, method/methodology, results and conclusions. This type of thesis can also be for practice-based submissions, where the thesis is accompanied by creative, physical outputs. A permanent record of these must be presented in a durable medium for publication/archiving purposes.
- **Article-based:** typically, this will include between three and five articles, which are published by a doctoral candidate during their period of candidature as a research student. However, this numerical range is a guide, rather than a regulation. These articles will either already be published or will be accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals at the time of submission. The thesis will usually have an introduction, presenting an explanation of the research question(s), the research subject, relevant literature and methodology, and a concluding chapter in which the results of the research are summarised and discussed. Regulation R12.10 notes that at the point of submission, an article-based thesis must include at least one article that has been through full peer-review, and has been accepted for publication.

Both types of thesis should meet the award objectives as specified in the Research Degree Regulations **R1.4**, **R1.5**.

A note on theses written in the first person

The University Research Degrees Committee agreed that a thesis written in the first person was credible in the social sciences domain, where first person reflexivity is a well-established practice, and appropriate for cross-disciplinary areas (especially where new protocols are being researched). Examiners are therefore asked to consider such a thesis as acceptable in publication terms, but to scrutinise and assess the thesis in accordance with the academic rigour required for the subject. The thesis would obviously need to clearly articulate the link between the discipline and the methodology.

5. The oral examination

The overarching purpose of the oral examination is to:

- enable the examiners to assure themselves that the thesis and the research it reports, are the candidate's own work.
- give the candidate an opportunity to orally defend the thesis and clarify any obscurities/issues there may be in it.
- enable the examiners to assess the candidate's broader knowledge of his/her subject area.

5.1. Roles and responsibilities

Director of Studies

It is the responsibility of the candidate's Director of Studies to make the practical arrangements for the oral examination and to notify these to their Research Institute PGR team and the Doctoral School Team via the RF4 form. The Doctoral School Team will confirm the arrangements in writing to the candidate and the examiners.

After the examining team has been appointed by RDC and the candidate has subsequently submitted their thesis, the DoS should contact all participants to organise the viva. The viva should usually take place between 4 and 6 weeks after thesis submission but can be outside of this timescale if examiner availability requires it.

Directors of Study should submit the RF4 form to their Research Institute PGR Admin team at least 4 weeks before the planned date of the viva, for Head of Research Degrees approval. Failure to do so may prevent the examination from going ahead on the planned date. The Doctoral School Team will send an email to all viva participants confirming the arrangements for the viva.

Prior to submitting the RF4 confirming the viva details, the Director of Studies will need to ascertain whether the viva will take place in person, solely online via videoconference, or a hybrid model.

If the candidate has a learning contract, careful consideration should be given to achieving the reasonable adjustments required to support the candidate in the viva. The DoS should state clearly on the RF4 the reasonable adjustments required for the viva, and the Doctoral School team will forward the form by email to all participants.

The Director of Studies must also liaise with their Head of Research Degrees to appoint an Independent Chair.

Independent Chair

All research degree oral examinations must have oversight from an independent Chair. **The Chair takes no part in the assessment process, which is solely the responsibility of the appointed examiners.** The overarching role of the Chair is to ensure that:

- the viva voce examination process is rigorous, fair, reliable and consistent
- the candidate has the opportunity to defend their thesis and respond to all questions posed by the examiners
- the questioning of the candidate by the examiners is conducted fairly and professionally
- the examiners adhere to the University's regulations and procedures
- advice is given about the regulations to the examiners and the candidate if required.

The role descriptor for an independent Chair is in Annex B. If the viva takes place via videoconference or a hybrid model, the independent Chair has an enhanced role in managing the IT aspects of the viva (see Annex C).

Examiners

The requirements of external examiners are set out in the Research Degree Regulations (in particular **R13, R14 and R15**)

Observers

The oral examination will involve the candidate, the examiners and the independent Chair. If requested by the candidate, a supervisor may also attend the viva but cannot participate in the examiners' preliminary meeting or post-viva deliberations (see **R9.5**). Candidates with learning contracts may also request the presence of a learning support worker or advisor to provide support during the examination.

5.2. Viva options

The candidate should be asked to express a preference for how their viva takes place, and Directors of Study should work with the candidate, examiners and independent Chair to agree the arrangements. Suitable arrangements are:

- Fully in-person, with all participants co-located in the same room on Sheffield Hallam's campus
- Fully online by videoconferencing
- A hybrid model, with some participants co-located and some online

The Director of Studies should make sure the candidate is aware that it may not be possible to meet their preference, and that it will depend on the circumstances and availability of the other participants. In particular, external examiners who are located at a distance from the University will not be required to travel.

5.2.1. In-person vivas

If all parties are willing and available, the viva may take place fully in-person. As a general principle, all vivas must take place in a suitable, quiet, properly heated and ventilated room and without interruption. Light refreshments and/or lunch should be provided as appropriate.

The Director of Studies is responsible for making the necessary arrangements and ensuring that they comply with any ongoing/current Covid-related requirements. This includes ensuring the room capacity is appropriate and that adequate ventilation can be provided, ensuring participants can observe social distancing, and may include asking participants to wear a face covering if one of the participants requests it.

Directors of Study should consult the latest guidance at: [Working-safely-on-campus](#)

Risk assessments

All on-campus activity must comply with the current Health and Safety guidance and Covid Risk Assessment High Level, which staff can access at: [COVID 19 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

5.2.2. Videoconference vivas

Vivas may take place via videoconference – either wholly with all participants joining via videoconference, or a mixed model. In both cases, the viva arrangements should follow the protocols in Annex C.

5.2.3. Hybrid vivas

Vivas may also take place with two or more participants co-located on the University's campus and the rest joining by videoconference. For these vivas, arrangements will need to follow the above guidance for in-person and videoconference vivas.

Hybrid vivas can be challenging to arrange and manage, particularly with regards to IT equipment, and ensuring all participants have equal opportunity to participate. The protocols for videoconference vivas (Annex C) list some additional considerations for hybrid vivas.

It is recommended that the Director of Studies ensures the independent Chair is willing to manage the additional complexities of a hybrid viva before confirming this approach.

The staff guidance on [Preparing-for-and-running-a-Hybrid-Meeting](#) may be useful.

All on-campus activity must comply with the current Health and Safety guidance and Covid Risk Assessment High Level, which staff can access at: [COVID 19 \(sharepoint.com\)](#)

5.3. Pre-examination meeting

Examiners will have a preliminary private meeting (suggested length at least 30 minutes) immediately prior to the oral examination, to:

- Exchange their preliminary reports on the thesis, if this has not already been done
- Identify issues to be raised in the examination
- Agree the broad strategy for the examination – who will ask which questions and in what order

5.4. During the viva

An oral examination may not proceed without all the appointed examiners being present. In the event of an examiner being unavailable, e.g. due to illness or technical issues, the oral examination must be postponed to another date.

The examiners should make the candidate feel at ease and explain the format the examination will take. For candidates with learning contracts, examiners must take account of any agreed reasonable adjustments and advise the candidate accordingly.

The examiners are responsible for conducting the oral examination in a fair and equitable manner. The independent Chair will have oversight of this and will note any irregularities in their overview report after the viva.

The examiners should each contribute to the examination process. The external examiner normally takes the lead role and provides a perspective on the comparability of the work being examined, with research degree standards elsewhere in the UK higher education sector. The internal examiner may be asked to comment on points of University Research Degree Regulations or procedures, but the Chair can also facilitate resolution of any queries and can contact the Doctoral School should they need to.

A balance should be struck between allowing the candidate adequate time to give full answers to exploratory questions, and the space to defend their work and the decisions they have taken with the research. Whilst some intense questioning and probing may be needed, it should be non-aggressive.

The oral examination should run for as long as may be necessary for it to serve its proper purpose, allowing short breaks if necessary/requested. The Chair will facilitate this, particularly where the candidate is struggling with the questioning, and time out may help the candidate to refocus. Candidates whose viva is taking place by videoconference may have a nominated buddy as support for them, who they can contact on any 'time out' from the viva.

The candidate and any observers present will be asked to withdraw before the examiners begin their final deliberations.

5.5. After the viva

The examiners should ensure that any conflict of opinion that may arise between them during the examination should, if possible, be resolved during the post-viva discussion. This will ensure that a joint recommendation can be reached and fed back to the candidate after the viva.

The recommendations available to the examiners in respect of the award of the degree are clearly indicated on the appropriate forms: *RF6M/D: Examiners' Final Recommendation on a Candidate for the Degree of Masters or Doctorate*.

Once a decision has been made, the candidate and any observer will be invited back into the proceedings to be verbally given the outcome. It should be clarified that this is a recommendation, and that the Dean of Research is responsible for conferring the award, after any changes to thesis have been undertaken to the satisfaction of the examiner(s).

After the outcome has been shared with the candidate, the examiners must complete and sign the RF6 form, and the Chair will return it to the Doctoral School Team via the !RDCadmin inbox – within the same day if possible. Any amendments required to the thesis should normally be submitted within the next 7 working days.

If the examiners are unable to make a joint recommendation, the candidate must be notified of this and given a clear indication of the procedure for concluding the matter. In these instances, separate RF6 reports should be completed by each examiner (**see R14.5**) and submitted to the Doctoral School team for consideration by Research Degrees Committee. Candidates will then be informed in writing of the RDC decision by the Doctoral School.

6. Amendments to the thesis and conferment of award

If a candidate passes the award with amendments to the thesis, the candidate will normally be allowed 4 months FTE from the oral examination date to complete them. However, if the candidate has extenuating circumstances during this period, and needs to request an extension to the deadline, this must be made in writing, supported the Director of Studies, and emailed to the rdcadmin@shu.ac.uk. The Research Institute HoRD and the Chair of RDC will consider the

request, and notification of the decision will be emailed by the Doctoral School. This is in accordance with section 20 of the 'Extenuating Circumstances Policy and Procedure for PGR Students'. These requests will be accepted where the candidate has valid reason, or where the examiners have already estimated, and stated in the RF6, that the amendments will take longer than the normal timescale.

The examiners must either indicate the corrections required on the report form or attach a list of the corrections to be made. Corrections must be carried out to the satisfaction of one/all of the examiners (as stated on the RF6 form) before the thesis is submitted in its final PDF/A version, for online submission and publication by the University Library. The examiner(s) deputed to approve the corrections must confirm to the Doctoral School in writing, by email, that the corrections have been done to their satisfaction.

The Dean of Research is then asked to confer the award. At that point, for doctoral award holders, candidates are formally allowed to change their title to Doctor.

6.1. Re-submission and re-examination

See Regulations section **R15**.

The University allows one re-examination subject to certain conditions – see Regulations section **R15.1**.

The options for re-examination are given in Regulations section **R15.3**.

The recommendations available to the examiners following re-examination are given in Regulations section **R15.6**.

7. Academic appeals

The [Academic Appeals Policy and Procedure](#) includes the facility for candidates to challenge the decision of research degree examiners, if they have valid grounds to do so. Under GDPR legislation, although the examiners' report forms (RF5M/D and RF6M/D) are confidential to the University and the examiners, the candidate may request sight of them after the oral assessment e.g., to support an appeal against the recommendations of the examiners. Research degree candidates may appeal against the recommendations of their examiners, as per section 11 of policy, on either or both of the following grounds:

- There has been an irregularity in the application of the published regulation, policy or procedure which has had an impact on the decision.
- There is relevant new evidence or information that you did not provide, and you have a valid reason why you did not submit it at the time.

Appeals will be investigated by staff in the Student Policy and Compliance Team in Student and Academic Services. If the Appeal Panel accepts the appeal for review, the Research Degrees Committee will be requested to liaise with the examiners to reconsider the decision. However, in cases where the conduct of research examiners is brought into question, a sub-panel of the Research Degrees Committee will undertake the review.

Annex A - List of Research Degree Examination Forms

Form	Description
RF3	Application for Approval of the Examiners and Thesis Title
RF4	Notification of the Arrangements for the Oral Examination
RF5M or RF5D	Examiner's Preliminary Report and Recommendation on a Candidate for the Degree of LLM/ MAbyRes/ MPhil or Doctorate
RF6M or RF6D	Examiners' Final Recommendation on a Candidate for the Degree of LLM/ MAbyRes/ MPhil or Doctorate
RF7M or RF7D	Examiner's Preliminary Report and Recommendation on the Re-examination of a Candidate for the Degree of LLM/ MAbyRes/ MPhil or Doctorate
RF8M or RF8D	Examiners' Final Recommendation on the Re-examination of a Candidate for the Degree of LLM/ MAbyRes/ MPhil or Doctorate
RFConf	Application for Confidentiality of Thesis
RFAB	Application for Approval of Article-based PhD

The Role of the Independent Chair in Research Degree Examinations

The University Research Degrees Committee has agreed the following role profile for staff acting as independent chairs in research degree examinations. In line with the QAA's UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Part B, Chapter 11) the chair will be a non-examining chair **who may not contribute to the assessment judgement.**

The overarching role of the Chair is to ensure that:

- the viva voce examination process is rigorous, fair, reliable and consistent;
- the candidate has the opportunity to defend the thesis and respond to all questions posed by the examiners;
- questioning of the candidate by the examiners is conducted fairly and professionally;
- the examiners adhere to the University's regulations and procedures,
- advice is given about the regulations to the examiners and the candidate if required;
- a chair's report is submitted to the Doctoral School as a formal record of the examination ***(recordings of proceedings are not permitted unless a student's learning contract specifies this).***

Role Profile

The expectations for all vivas are shown below. For online and hybrid vivas, Chairs will additionally set up and host the videoconference and must consult the 'Protocol for Postgraduate Research Degree Viva Examinations via Videoconferencing'. This is included in the 'Guidance Notes for Research Degree Examinations' (Annex C).

The Chair will receive a PDF copy of the thesis for reference purposes only and will be expected to do the following:

- see the preliminary reports from the examiners i.e., the RF5D for doctorates or RF5M for research masters. This is to give the Chair the necessary background knowledge of the issues/points raised in the reports in order to ensure that the examination is conducted appropriately.
- attend the last few minutes of the examiners' pre-meeting, to be informed about their plans for the viva, confirm that these are consistent with the initial reports, and query things which are not. Establish an approximate running order/agenda for the viva if the examiners have not already done so.
- open the examination by setting out the rules - the Chair will refer to the Guidance Notes (already sent to examiners with a copy of the thesis) and confirm the roles of those in the room, that **no final decisions/outcomes will be announced until completion of the viva**, that supervisors can act as observers but must only speak when invited to do so.

- silently monitor progress against the original plan for viva.
- be prepared to step in to instigate a 'Time-Out' when either a candidate becomes distressed, or in cases where a technical issue becomes apparent. It is also advised that the Chair call regular comfort breaks in order to give participants a rest from screen-time (in online or hybrid vivas).
- remain present for examiners' discussion post viva to:
 - provide advice on the interpretation of post-viva options (i.e., recommendations on the assessment outcome) – **SEE GUIDANCE BELOW WHICH CAN ALSO BE FOUND AT THE BACK OF THE RF6 FORM.**
 - ensure immediate completion of the examiners' joint report (RF6D/M). Any amendments required to the thesis should be emailed to ! RDCadmin (rdcadmin@shu.ac.uk) for sending to the candidate within 7 working days of the viva.
 - sign-off the independent chair proforma, confirming whether the viva was conducted appropriately.

In the case of disagreement between the examiners, the Chair's role is confined to advising the examiners on their options. The Chair should use their best endeavours to help the examiners to reach an agreed position. In cases where this is not possible, the examiners will be advised to submit separate joint reports for consideration by the University Research Degrees Committee.

Chairs will be expected to be one of the main points of reference in cases where a student appeal is lodged.

Chairs are required to complete a report on the conduct of the oral examination and submit this with the RF6D/M joint examiners' report. Please see template attached and return to ! RDCadmin (rdcadmin@shu.ac.uk).

In making the **joint recommendation on the RF6D/M** form, after the oral assessment has been completed, examiners should bear in mind the following when choosing which recommendation to make.

Outcome		Action
Recommendation A - The candidate has <u>passed the assessment</u>		
<p>The candidate is granted the degree of Doctorate, MPhil or MAbyRes</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This means the candidate has achieved a straight pass. There are no further substantive changes to be made to the thesis other than some minimal rephrasing, typographical or grammatical amendments to the thesis • The thesis meets all the assessment criteria • The candidate gave a strong defence of their thesis 	<p>No further assessment required by the examiners. The candidate will be responsible for having the thesis proof-read (if advised to do so) before submitting a final e-thesis for publication</p>
<p>The candidate is granted the degree of Doctorate, MPhil or MAbyRes subject to amendments and corrections being made to the thesis to the satisfaction of the internal/ external/ internal and external examiner(s).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This means the candidate has achieved a pass subject to amendments to the thesis • *The amendments should normally be completed within 4 months if the candidate is FT or 8 months if the candidate is PT • The candidate made a strong/satisfactory defence of their thesis <p><i>*this timescale can be extended on approval by the Chair of RDC if the candidate has valid reason.</i></p>	<p>The amended thesis must be checked by the internal or external or both/all examiner(s). Only on approval that the amendments have been done to the satisfaction of the examiner(s), can the candidate proceed to submission of the e-thesis for publication and be conferred with the award</p>

Continued on next page

Recommendation B – The candidate has not passed and must be re-examined

<p>The thesis must be revised and, if deemed satisfactory by the examiners, the candidate may be exempt from further oral examination;</p> <p>Please attach a list of deficiencies for forwarding to the candidate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This means the candidate has not passed (and is being referred for a second, final, assessment opportunity) • They must revise and re-submit the thesis for re-examination within 12 months of the viva date • The candidate performed satisfactorily in the viva • The candidate may be exempt from a further oral examination if the revised thesis is of the required standard 	<p><i>The full examining team must be involved in the re-examination of the thesis.</i> Each examiner will assess the revised thesis and submit an independent preliminary report. If the examiners agree that the revised thesis is satisfactory, the candidate will be exempt from a further oral examination. If the revised thesis is not satisfactory, the candidate will undertake another oral examination. A final decision will be made post-viva.</p>
<p>The thesis must be revised and the candidate must undergo a further oral examination;</p> <p>Please attach a list of deficiencies for forwarding to the candidate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This means the candidate has not passed • They must revise and re-submit the thesis for re-examination within 12 months of the viva date • The candidate did not perform satisfactorily in the viva and is required to undertake a further oral examination as part of the re-examination 	<p><i>The full examining team must be involved in the re-examination of the thesis.</i> Each examiner will assess the revised thesis and submit an independent preliminary report. The examiners will further assess the candidate through another oral examination. A final decision will be made post-viva.</p>
<p>The thesis is satisfactory, but the candidate must undergo a further oral examination;</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This means the candidate has not passed • The thesis is satisfactory but the candidate must undertake a further oral examination due to giving a poor defence of the work 	<p><i>The full examining team will further assess the candidate through another oral examination.</i> A final decision will be made post-viva.</p>

Continued on next page

Recommendation C (RF6D) - The candidate has not passed and has not met the assessment criteria or award objectives for a Doctorate.

The candidate is awarded a Masters qualification instead.

NB this means that the examiners agree that the candidate cannot revise the thesis to Doctoral standard within a 12-month period but should be made aware that an extension to the 12-month timescale may be approved by RDC if requested, if it is thought that a Doctorate may be achieved in a slightly longer timescale. If this is the case, Recommendation B should be considered instead.

The candidate has **not satisfied the examiners as a candidate for the degree of Doctorate**, and the examiners **recommend that the candidate be granted a Masters degree (MPhil or MProf)** subject to the presentation of the thesis amended to the satisfaction of the examiners (if appropriate).

(A short joint report explaining why this recommendation is made, together with a list of any corrections required should be appended to this form, which will be forwarded to the candidate. It would be helpful if the report could include an indication as to why the option of re-submission is not allowable.)

- The candidate has been awarded a Masters level qualification instead of Doctorate
- The candidate may or may not be required to amend the thesis (if they are required to do so, the amendments should be done **within 4 months if FT or 8 months if PT**)

The amended thesis must be checked by the internal or external or both/all examiner(s). Only on approval that the amendments have been done to the satisfaction of the examiners, can the candidate proceed to submission of the e-thesis for publication and be conferred with the award.

Recommendation C (RF6M) or D (RF6D) - The candidate has not passed and has not met the assessment criteria or award objectives. They cannot be re-examined.

The candidate has not satisfied the examiners as a candidate for the degree of Doctorate, MPhil or MAbyRes and the examiners recommend that the candidate is not granted the degree or allowed a re-examination.

(A short joint report explaining why this recommendation is made should be appended, which will be forwarded to the candidate. It would be helpful if the report could include an indication as to why the option of re-submission is not allowable).

- The candidate has **failed with no re-assessment opportunities offered**
- This is usually for cases where the oral examination has uncovered research misconduct which were not immediately apparent in the thesis such as breaches of ethics, dishonest practice, impersonation etc.

No further assessment required by the examiners.

Independent Chair's Report – First Assessment

Name of research degree candidate:	
Date of oral examination:	
External examiner(s):	
Internal examiner(s):	

Please complete the following sections. This report should be used to give a clear account of the examination. It may be used as evidence in the event of a student appeal.

- 1. General comments on the conduct of the viva (including the pre-meeting of the examiners). Please confirm whether or not, in your opinion, the candidate had a fair hearing and the opportunity to defend their work:**

2. Note anything unusual or unexpected which occurred (which may be deemed an irregularity in the process):

3. Confirm any regulatory queries raised by the examiners:

4. Confirm the examination recommendation by the examiners according to the RF6D/M joint report:

Outcome

- Straight pass
- Pass with amendments (see below)
- Resubmission

If a pass with amendments, confirm who is to check the amended thesis and their preferred method for the student to present the changes:

- Internal examiner only
- External examiner only
- Internal and external examiner(s)

- Highlighting sections of the text
- Providing a version with tracked changes
- Providing a separate document explaining where the changes have been made

DECLARATION PAGE

Declaration by the Independent Chair (please select the statements and complete the below as required):

- I confirm that the oral examination was conducted in line with the points outlined in the Chair's role profile and that due process was followed in line with the Research Degree Regulations
- For online and hybrid vivas, please state the IT platform used:

.....

Name of Chair:.....

Signature: (handwritten/ electronic/ by email as preferred)

.....

Annex C: Protocol for Postgraduate Research Degree Viva Examinations via Videoconferencing

In response to the Covid pandemic, the University's Research Degrees Committee (RDC) approved a relaxation of the usual co-location requirements for viva examinations by videoconferencing. RDC has agreed that these arrangements can continue following the easing of Covid restrictions.

Vivas can now take place either wholly via videoconferencing, or a hybrid model where two or more participants are co-located and the rest join by videoconference.

Where the candidate will be on their own (i.e., not co-located with the independent Chair or other staff member), it is particularly important to consider the support for and wellbeing of the candidate before, during and after the viva.

This document sets out the standard protocol for vivas by videoconferencing or hybrid model.

Roles and Responsibilities

The Director of Studies

After the examining team has been appointed by RDC and the candidate has submitted their thesis, the DoS should contact all participants to organise the viva. The viva should usually take place between 4 and 6 weeks after thesis submission, but can be outside of this timescale, depending on examiner availability.

The DoS and other supervisors are strongly advised to offer the candidate the opportunity to experience a mock videoconference viva, and to reflect on their preferred setup and what contingencies might be drawn up.

The DoS will be asked to make themselves available to the candidate at the end of the viva, either by telephone or online, and may join the viva as an observer if the candidate requests it. It is suggested that the DoS may also act as a "buddy" for the candidate during and after the viva – see 'Support for the Candidate' below.

The Candidate

The candidate should respond to the DoS and Chair's communications in relation to the viva and confirm they have the requisite levels of technical capability and hardware/software set-up needed to participate in a video conference viva. The candidate should ensure they have a suitable room from which they can participate in the viva comfortably and without interruption. If the candidate's home environment is not suitable for a viva, the Director of Studies should endeavour to book a suitable room on campus for the candidate.

Candidates will be asked to sign the RF4 to confirm they agree to the arrangements.

International candidates are advised to verify whether a video conference viva is recognised by their home government or relevant ministry.

The Independent Chair

In addition to the duties in the independent Chair role descriptor, the Chair is responsible for setting up and hosting the videoconference in line with the protocol in this document. See sections below for details.

Support for the Candidate

The candidate may have a “buddy” to provide them with emotional support and an opportunity to reflect before and after the viva. The buddy should be identified on the RF4 form.

The buddy could be the DoS if the student requests it, or it could be another member of SHU academic staff with experience of doctoral examinations. If the candidate would rather have a friend or relative as their buddy, a case should be made to the Chair of RDC and submitted with the RF4 form.

Candidates will be free to define how they would like to access support from their buddy (telephone, online etc.). If the DoS or other supervisor acts as the buddy, they may, if the candidate and examiners agree, also be observers of the video conference viva with their camera and microphone turned off. Otherwise, the buddy should interact with the candidate by their preferred method but only at times when the candidate is NOT in the viva “Room”.

Concealed/secret broadcasting of the viva proceedings to the buddy or anyone else not formally included in the viva by the Chair will be treated as misconduct.

Recommended IT Platform

Participants are free to use any appropriate IT platform, although Zoom is recommended. The Chair should ensure they are familiar and comfortable with the platform in advance of the viva. The IT platform to be used should be noted on the RF4.

Further information on setting up and using Zoom is available on the staff intranet:

[Working Remotely - How to work effectively off-campus](#)

Any technical queries should be directed to Digital Technology Services: [Contact ITHelp](#)

General tips for using Zoom:

- Participants should be advised to view the meeting in Gallery mode so that all participants are clearly visible.
- The Chair should ensure that the meeting room is locked once all participants have joined, so that the viva cannot be ‘gatecrashed’ by other people with the host’s meeting room link. Under ‘manage participants’, click More, then lock meeting. This prevents new attendees from joining.
- The Share feature enables participants to share anything open on their desktop.
- Zoom has Waiting Room and Breakout Room functions which can be used to manage the viva process - see below for more information.
- The Chair can choose to mute/unmute participants through the ‘manage participants’ screen.
- The Chair should request that the Chat function not be used, as private messaging of individual participants would not be appropriate. Similarly, no other messaging between participants (e.g. by phone apps or texts) should be attempted.

The Waiting Room allows the meeting host (Chair) to control the point at which a participant joins the meeting. Participants can be admitted one by one or all at once. Participants can also be sent to the Waiting Room during a meeting. Guidance on setting up a Waiting Room can be found at [Using Zoom Waiting Rooms](#)

Breakout Rooms are again managed by the meeting host, and more than one can be created for each meeting. The host can move between rooms and send participants to one of the rooms. However, if these are used, the host should check that participants do not re-join the main meeting room unless asked to do so. Guidance on using breakout rooms is available at [Using Zoom Breakout Rooms](#)

Recording of Vivas

Many videoconference platforms allow the meeting to be recorded. **RDC has explicitly banned the recording of vivas by videoconference.** This is because there is proven evidence that recording in such situations adds to anxiety and can impact on the candidate's performance. To record a viva would therefore be treated as misconduct. It is also a GDPR issue if participants are filmed without their consent.

Prior to the Day

In the week before the viva, the Chair should make contact with all participants and send out the link to the videoconferencing meeting to be used for the viva.

At least 24 hours before the viva, the Chair should check with the examining team, the candidate and any observer and/or buddy, that the software works ahead of the viva day. It is also recommended that the Chair requests a contact telephone number from each participant to communicate in the event of any technological failures.

On the Day

1. The Chair should ask the candidate to call in 15 minutes prior to the examiners' private meeting to ensure their facilities are working properly and reassure the candidate by answering any questions they may have. If the candidate is not known to the Chair, the Chair can ask the student to show their student SHU card to the camera in order to verify their identity. Any observers may also join at this point.
2. Once the Chair and candidate are happy with the environment and all technology is working well, the candidate and observer(s) will either be placed in a virtual Waiting Room where available or, if this isn't available, the candidate and observer(s) will be asked to leave the viva room, leaving telephone contact details with the Chair.
3. Once the candidate has left the Room the examiners will be asked to join and the Chair will explain the process of the viva.
4. Once the introductions have been made, the Chair can go onto mute and turn their video off whilst the examiners conduct their pre-viva meeting. The examiners will use the pre-meeting to discuss their preliminary reports on the candidate's thesis. These will normally have been exchanged between the examiners prior to the viva date by the Doctoral School team. The Chair will enter the Room around 5 minutes prior to the start time of the viva and clarify/confirm the schedule and content of the questioning which the examiners have agreed will form the framework for the oral assessment.
5. At the end of the pre-viva meeting, the Chair will invite the candidate and observer(s) to join the Room, explain the process to all and may ask the candidate to show the Chair their location (on camera) to ensure they are alone.
6. The Chair should then turn off their microphone unless they need to speak or intervene during the viva. Similarly, the observer(s) should turn off their microphone(s) and webcam(s). However, if the candidate is struggling with the questioning and becomes agitated/upset, the Chair may invite the observer to speak on the candidate's behalf as a prompt, or can agree a time out, as would occur in a face-to-face viva.
7. At the conclusion of the viva, the Chair should either send the candidate and observer(s) to an alternative room or ask them to leave the call during the deliberations. They will then be invited back in at the end of discussions so the outcome can be verbally confirmed to them.

Other considerations

It is likely that a viva by video conference may take longer than usual, and it will be necessary to allow time for additional breaks during the viva for the comfort of all participants. Any of the participants may request a break during the viva, and the Chair will facilitate this.

If anyone enters the physical room being used by the candidate or examiners during the viva, the viva must be temporarily halted and these individuals asked to leave the room before the viva can recommence.

If there is a technical issue

If there is a technical issue either before the viva commences or during the viva, and it is obvious that the technology is causing disruption to the proceedings, then the Chair must instigate a 'time out' whilst advice is sought on possible actions to resolve the issues. If a satisfactory resolution cannot be found, agreement will be sought by the Chair with all parties that the viva be stopped and voided as an assessment attempt so that the candidate is not disadvantaged. The DoS will discuss and agree with all parties the rescheduling of the viva; options for this are another viva by videoconference or, if participants are willing, an in-person or hybrid viva.

If a technical issue occurs at, or near to the end of the viva, the Chair and examiners may use their discretion to determine whether the candidate was given a fair hearing during the time duration the candidate had to defend their thesis. If they decide that this was the case, then the examiners should make a recommendation on the outcome as per normal guidance. If not, the options above will apply.

Candidates will not be allowed to appeal an assessment outcome on the basis of technical issues. Any irregular issues arising during the allotted time of the viva will be addressed and adjudicated upon by the Chair at the time they occur, in line with the guidance above.

Particular considerations for hybrid vivas

In a hybrid viva, at least two of the participants will be co-located on the University's campus while the remainder join by videoconference. This will present additional challenges to the arrangement of the viva, particularly in verifying the IT arrangements and ensuring all participants have equal opportunity to participate. It is recommended that the Director of Studies ensures the independent Chair is willing to manage the additional complexities of a hybrid viva before confirming this approach.

The Director of Studies should ensure that all co-located participants and the independent Chair are aware of how the IT aspects will work and whether they need to bring any equipment such as laptops or headsets.

Considerations include whether the co-located participants will use individual laptops or the room's PC and AV equipment. The room layout must be such that all participants can see and hear everybody else. If using the room's PC/AV equipment, the Director of Studies should ensure the room has the required equipment and check the set-up a few days before the viva so that any issues can be addressed in time.

The independent Chair will need to consider how to manage the online 'waiting room' aspect of hybrid vivas to ensure the candidate is not party to the examiners' deliberations; this may involve asking the candidate to physically leave the room as in a standard in-person viva.

The staff guidance on preparing for and running hybrid meetings may be useful:

[Preparing for and running a Hybrid Meeting](#)