

COVID 19: ADVICE ON HOLDING VIVAS

MAY 2021 UPDATE ON POLICY: For the past year, permission from URDC has been required to confirm that reasonable measures have been taken to ensure, as far as possible, that a remote viva process will not disadvantage the candidate. A number of pre-viva tests have also been required. Given that experience so far has been generally positive, and staff are increasingly familiar with the relevant technology, URDC have agreed that policy should now change:

- **Prior 'permission' to hold the viva is no longer needed**, although a report including confirmation from all parties is still required after the viva.
 - **One test of the equipment, platform and connection** (rather than the previous three) should be undertaken (bearing in mind that the pre-viva meeting will function as a secondary test).
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Conducting an on-campus viva may continue to be difficult for some time. Any forthcoming viva should still either be organised and run remotely or postponed until such time as it is safe to hold it face-to-face.

Not everyone is going to be comfortable with the idea of holding a four-way remote viva.

- All RIE training relating to vivas (e.g. Examining Research Degrees, The Viva Experience and Exam Panel Chair Training) will, in the current situation, include advice on remote vivas.
- If the EPC is not comfortable chairing a viva in such a situation, they may be replaced by someone who has previous experience of chairing remote vivas, or is more familiar or comfortable with the technology. Replacing the EPC will require approval. This can be done through email by contacting the URDC Convenor (Dr Calum Neill c.neill@napier.ac) and copying in Research Degrees (researchdegrees@napier.ac.uk).
- If any of the other parties – *including the Director of Studies* – is uncomfortable with holding a remote viva, then the viva will need to be postponed.

Guidance on remote vivas is set out below. If you have any additional questions, having read through this, please contact researchdegrees@napier.ac.uk. However, be aware that technical questions about holding the viva remotely are best addressed to Information Services. IS guidance on working from home is available here:

<https://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/cit/OffCampusServices/Pages/HomeWorking.aspx>

We urge you to discuss the situation with your student in the first instance. The viva experience is often a very significant moment for PhD students, one which is likely to stay with them for many years. With this in mind, holding a traditional face-to-face viva might well be your student's preferred option. Please discuss this with your student and ascertain whether or not they would prefer to postpone the viva until such time as it is possible to hold it in a standard fashion. Of course, the extent to which postponement is realistically possible will also depend on the availability of the examiners. *Please be clear with the student that you are soliciting their preference but that this preference may not be possible.*

After you have spoken with your student, please make contact with the examiners and ascertain their perspectives. If they are happy to work with the student's preference, whether this be a

remote viva or a postponement, then you should proceed to make the necessary arrangements. If the examiners are not happy to work with the student's preference, please make contact with the student once more and discuss the matter further.

Should the outcome of your discussions be that a postponement is the accepted option for all, please inform the Research Degrees Office (researchdegrees@napier.ac.uk) indicating the likely timeframe for reorganising the viva. Please be mindful that this decision may need to be revisited. The Research Degrees team will send confirmation of the decision to all parties.

Should the outcome of your discussions be that staging a remote viva is the accepted option for all, you must read and follow the **REQUIREMENTS FOR HOLDING A VIVA** outlined below.

Please note: Under normal circumstances, we would not approve a multiply remote viva, wherein parties are connecting from more than two locations. Neither would we normally approve non-visual remote connection. Under the current exceptional circumstances, we will consider approving four way and non-visual connections. Please, however, consider seriously how these exceptional changes are likely to impact on both the student's experience and the efficiency and security of the examination process.

If a remote viva is held, any supervisor asked to be present in these circumstances should be prepared to leave the call entirely in the event of any connectivity issues.

REQUIREMENTS FOR HOLDING A VIVA 'REMOTELY' (interim Covid19 policy)

The summary purpose of this process is that the Exam Panel Chair MUST ensure that there is no avoidable disadvantage, or unreasonable additional pressure, conferred on the candidate by these exceptional circumstances, and that the examination is conducted to the academic standards as set out in the Research Degrees Framework:

- **The Director of Studies** must ensure, in advance of the examination, that the candidate is familiar with how the viva will proceed and with the technology that will be used.
- **The Exam Panel Chair** must contact both examiners, in advance of the viva, and arrange with them the manner in which the viva will be structured – in other words, hold the type of discussion which would normally occur immediately pre-viva – and also ensure that the examiners are familiar with the technology that will be used.
- **The Exam Panel Chair** will be expected to provide, *following the examination*, (1) written details of the setup of the viva, including the locations of all parties and the mode of telecommunication which was utilized and (2) written confirmation that all parties were appraised of the situation and consented to the viva being held in this manner and (3) confirmation from all parties (including the candidate) that the format did not in any way influence the outcome of the viva examination.

TECHNOLOGY

The Director of Studies, in liaison with the Exam Panel Chair, MUST:

1. make arrangements as early as possible before the viva, and agree to utilise the most stable technology platform available in order to mitigate as far as is possible potential technology related disturbances to the viva. The recommended platforms for use are [MSTeams](#), Cisco [WebEx](#) and, as a back up, [Skype](#). There are open sessions being run about WebEx which you

might want to join if you haven't used it before:

<https://blogs.napier.ac.uk/learningtechnologyhub/2020/03/17/open-webex-sessions/>)

2. ensure there is a backup in place – for example, if WebEx is the primary platform, then Skype may be used as a backup should WebEx fail. **NB:** *should the back-up also fail, the viva should be postponed.*
3. The **Exam Panel Chair**, in liaison with the **Director of Studies**, MUST ensure that the equipment, platform and connection are tested prior to the viva. This should preferably include all parties at the same time. Where such a joint test is not possible, the EPC should conduct a test with each party separately. (Or a joint test for those who can be available to take part, and a separate test or tests with each person not at the joint test.)
4. **The pre-viva meeting** will function as a secondary check on the day of the viva. The **Exam Panel Chair** should also make an arrangement to contact the candidate no later than one hour before the viva to check their connection.

The Exam Panel Chair:

1. must familiarise themselves with the technology being employed;
2. must ask the candidate to confirm that they are alone in the room;
3. will retain the ability to cancel the viva if either they, an examiner, or the student feels the quality of communication is insufficient;
4. at the end of the examination, will obtain confirmation from all parties (including the candidate) that the format did not in any way influence the outcome of the viva examination. This should be reported on the **Confirmation of Remote Viva** form and submitted to researchdegrees@napier.ac.uk as part of the post-viva paperwork.

PLEASE NOTE: In cases where a supervisor is present, should any connectivity issues occur the supervisor should leave the call entirely.
