Use of Video Streaming for research degree transfer and final examinations

Hints, Tips and Good Practice

The video-streamed viva policy (see Annex I) was introduced in March 2020 in response to the Coronavirus situation, to enable the University to continue to support PGRs through the transfer and thesis examination process. The following hints, tips and good practice have been collated from feedback from internal examiners, independent chairs and PGRs who have completed an all-video-streaming final viva since March 2020. They are not intended as a prescriptive set of instructions – or an exhaustive list of things to consider – but it is hoped that they will provide helpful insight for staff and PGRs when considering the final viva arrangements. Feedback from transfer vivas will be added when received.

This document has been put together by Doctoral College Operations with thanks to the Examiners, Independent Chairs and PGRs who have fed back on their experiences so far. This document will be reviewed and expanded in light of further experience. All feedback would be very much appreciated to allow us to respond to issues and review and improve our guidance. This can be sent to Doctoral College Operations (rp_examinations@adm.leeds.ac.uk).

A Software

- Microsoft Teams is the preferred tool to use for the viva. Teams has the advantage of familiarity for Leeds participants. There are a number of remote working support pages and information covering Teams available on the IT website.
- In Teams, you can invite those outside our organisation (e.g. the external examiner) to a meeting using the calendar function. Please see Annex II of this document for a step-by-step walkthrough to set up the external examiner on the video call. IT also have an article on their website about how you can host a meeting with externals.
- There are a number of support pages and information available on the IT website.
- Zoom has been removed from the list of acceptable tools for vivas (as of April 2020). Please see the IT website for further information.

B General hints, tips and feedback

Before the viva

- Confidence with the software is important, so consider if any parties need additional support.
- ODPL are running sessions for internal examiners and Independent Chairs and a ‘Preparing for Your Video Streamed Viva using Teams’ for PGRs – see Section D of this document for further information. PGRs can also request a mock viva via their Supervisor.
• Testing/trial run of the software in the day(s) before the viva is important.

• The assessor/examiners must be able to discuss in private during the pre and post-viva meetings.

• There may be challenges where you may – in a face-to-face viva – ask the PGR to draw something for the examiners. Think about how you might manage this beforehand, if this is something that might be needed. (E.g. share screen function).

• Check that pastoral support arrangements are in place. The policy requires that arrangements are in place for pastoral support (normally via the supervisor\(^1\) or other appropriate member of staff) to be available to the PGR immediately after the viva, should this be necessary. It is also important to consider the important role this can play in the PGR experience at the end of a successful viva. An Independent hair should be in place. An online viva checklist is available.

At the start of the viva

• It is sensible to allow a period of time (20 minutes or so) at the start of the viva for all parties to become familiar with the environment. Please do spend time at the start of the viva to put all parties at ease and ensure they are comfortable with the technology and set-up before commencing the viva.

• Agree at the start what will happen if someone’s connection drops out and you need to pause the viva until connection has been resumed (e.g. alternative means of contact (email, telephone) in the event this is needed to discuss arrangements).

• If audio and/or visual communication is lost with one or more of the parties (candidate, examiners, chair) during the viva the viva should be paused until communication is re-established. If such communication problems continue and are severely disruptive, the examiners and chair should discuss with the PGR whether to postpone the viva. The PGR should be informed of this at the start of the viva.

• Inform the PGR at the start that they must stop the examiners – or ask for a question to be repeated – if they find any issues with sound/video quality.

• All parties should have the pdf version of the thesis open on their computer so that each party can show their respective screens. This may be helpful in conversations about which equation, diagram, etc is being referred to.

• Careful consideration should be given to the use of breaks. Online meetings may take longer and can be more tiring than face-to-face meetings. It might be helpful to agree at the start some pre-arranged break times for the benefit of all parties (without interrupting the flow of the viva). Reassure all parties at the start that they can request a break as and when needed.

\(^1\) If not already attending the viva as an observer
• It is understood that staff and PGRs may have young/school-age children at home, plus pets, doorbells or other unexpected factors which would not be a factor in a traditional viva. Recognise this, and reassure everyone from the start that they should not worry if such events do occur. Remember breaks are fine. The role of the Independent Chair can be helpful here to reassure all parties, should unexpected interruptions occur. The tone of the meeting should not be over-formal, as this could make the candidate feel that interruptions and breaks are not possible.

• The camera must be on (telephone vivas are not permitted). No recording of the viva is permitted.

*During the viva*

• It is important to pay attention to the way the tech is working, as well as the academic content of the examination. Check at regular intervals that sound/video quality etc remains satisfactory. The Independent Chair can play an important role in supporting the examiners and the PGR by taking some of the responsibilities for technology off the examiners and can take a broader overview of the viva. You can mute the video (and microphone) of the Independent Chair – unmuting when it is necessary for the Chair to intervene – and the Supervisor if that helps with audio / connectivity.

• Asking questions of the PGR may present new challenges not found in a face-to-face viva. For example, coordinating questions between the examiners (in the absence of the usual eye contact) and not being able to point to an equation/figure that in front of everyone on the table. Accept that there may be, at times, a more ‘you go’, ‘no, you go’ type of discussion as a result. The Chair can usefully play a role here, making sure that examiners take turns to speak.

• Some examiners have found it helpful to agree a firmer order of questions/questioners at the pre-meeting than might have done in a face-to-face viva.

*At the end of the viva*

• The Independent Chair (or Internal) should check explicitly with the PGR at the end of the viva whether they were happy with how it was conducted from a practical point of view and if there is anything they would like noted (e.g. I had some difficulty hearing the questions when we were talking about X and didn’t feel I answered as well as I might).

C Useful links

• [Online final viva checklist](#)
• [Independent Chair for an online final viva – guidance and form](#)
• [Reasonable adjustments for PGR assessments](#)
• [Policy on video streaming for a research degree final oral examination](#)
For Internal Examiners and Independent Chairs

Organisational Development and Professional Learning are now offering staff support in preparation for video-streamed Vivas using Teams. An approximate half hour Teams meeting will:

1. Highlight key points from the University’s revised video streaming policy
2. Run through the ‘top tips’ now being collated after a number of recent video vivas
3. Allow you to try out features in Teams and see how your personal computing ‘set-up’ is going to work for you

Simply get in touch with Dr Tony Bromley by email t.p.bromley@adm.leeds.ac.uk and we will arrange a Teams meeting as appropriate. (Note: We are also offering this session to postgraduate researcher candidates)

For PGRs - Preparing for Your Video Streamed Viva using Teams.

It can, understandably, be an anxious time as you approach your final doctoral viva. If you are also unfamiliar with video streaming and you find you now have a video-streamed viva, again understandably, this can add to the anxiety. Guidance on the Viva generally and for videos streaming more specifically, is now available in a new ‘Your Viva’ section of the Leeds Doctoral College organisation in Minerva*(Near the top of the left hand menu). However, just to re-assure you, a number of video-streamed Vivas have now successfully taken place and we are also offering additional support.

We are now offering mock video streamed Vivas** for those with upcoming Vivas. As we get requests, we will look to put together a Teams meeting with up to three postgraduate researchers and a facilitator. We can tailor the session dependent upon the particular needs of participants but we would look to cover:

1. Exploring the Teams video streaming environment and capabilities
2. Trialling how the experience works for you, with your set up, in a safe environment.
3. Try out some general Viva questions in this ‘mock’ Viva set up, so that you can experience answering questions and explaining your research in a video streaming environment.

Sessions would last for around 30 minutes but up to a maximum of an hour as needed.

If you are interested in a mock Teams Viva please contact Dr Tony Bromley by email t.p.bromley@adm.leeds.ac.uk

**LOGIN to Minerva: Go to: https://minerva.leeds.ac.uk/ Log in with your usual University IT account (username@leeds.ac.uk).
On the home page click on the ‘Discover tab’ top right.
Type ‘Leeds Doctoral College’ in the ‘What are you looking for?’ search box.
Click on ‘Leeds Doctoral College (Organisation)’.
If you are not enrolled you will see ‘enrol’ bottom left. Click on enrol and you are in!

**Note that you can ask you supervisor to do a mock viva with you. Our support here is offered in addition to any support from your supervisor
University policy on arrangements for the transfer viva/final examination

1. The University’s policy remains that transfer assessments and final vivas should be conducted with all parties in attendance in person. We recognise, however, that in the current situation there will be many situations (perhaps all, for a period of time) in which this will not be possible.

2. In view of this, arrangements are in place for the viva to be conducted by video streaming, with all participants completing the process remotely. The exceptional regulations outlined below should be applied.

3. In all cases the integrity of the transfer/examination process must be paramount to ensure the examination is conducted fairly and robustly, in accordance with University policy. Alternative arrangements will only be considered where Graduate Board can be satisfied of the fairness and consistency of the process, that this will be conducted appropriately according to expected standards, and that the PGR will not be placed at a disadvantage.

4. The University reserves the right to require that a viva be postponed and a face-to-face viva rearranged at a later date if it is not satisfied with the alternative arrangements proposed, or in the case of technical difficulties on the day.

5. These should be considered extraordinary arrangements in response to, and for the duration of, the current situation only. This does not represent a permanent change to established policy for PGR assessments. University policy remains that the transfer viva/oral examination will normally take place in Leeds with the PGR and all appointed assessors/examiners present.

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2 Video streaming may be carried out via any reliable video conferencing system (Microsoft Teams is the recommended platform). Please note that Zoom has been removed from the list of acceptable tools for vivas. Please see the advice on IT website for further advice.
6. This guidance will be reviewed regularly in the light of the changing situation. Graduate Schools are encouraged to contact Doctoral College Operations to discuss individual cases.

**Video streamed transfer or final examination**

7. A transfer viva/oral examination conducted using video streaming should otherwise be comparable to those used for a face-to-face oral examination. Due consideration should be given to the environment in which the parties are located, that this is fit for the purposes of an oral examination and that it is in all other ways comparable to those used for face-to-face examination. Appropriate consideration must be given to time zones.

8. Particular consideration should be given to the location of the PGR. The candidate must be alone and undisturbed during the examination. The transfer panel/examiners will be required to verify this at the start of the viva and must be satisfied that the PGR is alone and that the environment is appropriate.\(^3\)

9. The Graduate School must confirm that pastoral support (normally via the supervisor or other appropriate member of staff, who might be available via video streaming or telephone) will be available to the PGR immediately after the viva, should this be necessary.

10. In the case of a final examination, an Independent Chair will normally be required.\(^4\) Please see Annex I. Any Graduate School facing difficulties should contact Doctoral College Operations for advice.

11. An Independent Chair is not required for a transfer viva being held by video streaming.

12. All the other usual arrangements set out in the former video streaming policy will apply including: the assessor/examiners must be able to discuss in private during the pre and post-viva meetings; a thorough testing of the connection must be completed in advance; the camera must be on (telephone vivas are not permitted); no permanent recording must be taken.

13. A thorough testing of the connection must be conducted before the oral examination. This should include both a ‘trial run’ a few days before the oral examination and immediate, prior testing of the connection on the day before the candidate arrives.

14. Having to interrupt the oral examination to continually refresh the connection can disrupt the flow of the oral examination and disadvantage the candidate. If there are any doubts about the connection and whether it will last the duration of the assessment/examination the examination cannot go ahead using video streaming and must be rescheduled. All parties must understand that in the event of any failure with the technology before or

\(^3\) The PGR should be asked to show the room at the start of the examination, and have the door in view behind the PGR, if possible.

\(^4\) Where a Chair is required due to the online format of the viva, more relaxed criteria has been agreed. Please see Annex I.
during the oral examination it will not be possible for the examination to continue it will be necessary for the oral examination to be rescheduled.

15. All parties must have access to, and be comfortable with the use of, the appropriate technology. Video streaming should not be used in any cases where any party (including the PGR) is not comfortable with the arrangements or the technology. The use of video streaming should not form grounds for a subsequent appeal and if there are any doubts or concerns the viva must be postponed and a face-to-face viva arranged at a later date.
Annex II

Setting up a PGR viva using Teams

You can do this using the calendar function and invite the external examiner to join the meeting, as follows. IT also have an article on their website about how you can host a meeting with externals.

1. Open Teams and select the Calendar option from the left hand side menu

2. Go to the date and start time of your meeting and create a new meeting event. Give your meeting a title

3. In the "Add required optional attendees" box you can search for internal Leeds attendees by name and include them in the invite (Independent Chair, Supervisor (if attending as an observer) and the PGR). You should also include here the email address for the external examiner. (You can either add manually or look up the email address for the external examiner in GRAD and copy and paste this into the meeting request (this should normally be their Institutional email address)).

4. Set the start and end time for your meeting. Leave the "Does not repeat" option. You do not need to include a Channel or a location so leave these blank. You can add further details in the text box at the end.

You will need to consider setting up a separate meeting for the pre and post-viva meetings with just the examiners and Independent chair, as well as a meeting for the viva which also includes the PGR and the Supervisor. The examiners will need to be able to discuss privately after the viva, and then call the PGR and Supervisor into that meeting when they are ready to discuss the result.

You should also consider setting up a test meeting in the days before the viva to allow a trial run of the connection and allow for familiarisation with the software.
5. When you are finished, select the Send option at the top right hand of the screen.

6. All parties will receive the meeting invite (which they can accept in the usual way) which will include the "Join Microsoft Teams Meeting" option at the bottom. This is what the external examiner will need to use to join the meeting on the day of the viva.

7. On the day of the viva, the Leeds participants can join the meeting at the appropriate time by accessing the event in the Teams Calendar and selecting join or by following the link in the email notification. The External Examiner will need to join the meeting selecting the Join Microsoft Teams Meeting option in the email notification.

8. When the external examiner clicks on the link it will ask them if they want to open the meeting in the Web Browser or in the desktop application, depending on what they are using. They will then be given a text box and asked to type their name.

9. From here, the external examiner will be admitted to a lobby. All Leeds participants will receive a notification that the external examiner is in the lobby and will have an option to admit them to the meeting. The meeting can commence once all parties have joined the meeting and the external examiner has been admitted to the meeting from the lobby.

10. If the external is in the lobby for 15 minutes without being admitted into the meeting they will be automatically removed from the lobby which means they will need to re-join using the link in the email if they want to come back in. When someone joins as a “Guest” they don’t have all the same functionality as Leeds participants (e.g. they don’t have the chat function during the meeting).

11. Different devices work slightly differently. The key advice is to test the equipment and software before the day of the viva to allow all parties to be confident before the viva.