Use of Video Streaming\(^1\) for research degree transfer and final examinations

Extraordinary arrangements in response to the Coronavirus situation

**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.

\(^1\) 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.²

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.³ 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.

² 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.
³ Where a Chair is required due the online format of the viva, more relaxed criteria has been agreed. Please see Annex I.
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 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.

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Use of an Independent Chair for video-streamed final research degree examinations (temporary arrangements in response to the Covid-19 pandemic)

In some circumstances, an Independent Chair will only be required because of the video-streaming format of the viva, and the team is otherwise experienced in UK research degree examinations. In these cases, the following criteria will be applied:

- The Independent Chair will normally be expected to be a member of staff of the University of Leeds and an experienced research degree examiner.\(^4\)
- Between them, the Internal Examiner and Independent Chair will normally be expected to have examined at least three research degrees, including at least one at Leeds within the last 3 years.
- Internal examiners who have already conducted a video-streaming viva at the University of Leeds may examine without an Independent Chair, on a case by case basis.

For a viva by video streaming, the Independent Chair will play an important role in supporting the examiners and the PGR. The Chair will take a broader overview of the arrangements, and a good practice guide is available, which draws out areas the examiners and Chair should consider. These include:

- Ensuring a period at the start of the viva for all parties to become familiar with the environment and comfortable with the software.
- Taking an overview of the way the technology is working, which might include checking at regular intervals that sound/video quality etc. remains satisfactory.
- Ensuring the PGR is informed at the start that they must stop the examiners - or ask for a question to be repeated - if they find any issues with sound or video quality.
- Ensuring consideration is given to the use of breaks.
- Reassuring and advising all parties should unexpected interruptions occur.
- Checking 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.

The Chair must be present for the duration of the viva but it may not be necessary for them to be present for the pre or post viva discussions. The Independent Chair may choose to attend, or the team may request that the Independent Chair is present at either or both. This should be recorded on the Chair’s report. If not attending the full pre-viva meeting it is good practice for the Chair to speak with the examiners briefly before the viva.

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\(^4\) Other Leeds examination experience could be taken into account when considering any nominations which fell below the published criteria. This might include acting as Director of PGR Studies or as a member of the Examinations Group.
The Independent Chair is not expected to read the thesis, play a role in academic examination of the candidate, or question the candidate on the work being examined at the oral examination. You can, however, access a PDF copy of the thesis in GRAD, if this would be helpful to you in your role:

- You can find the PGR under the examination section of your "My Postgraduate Researchers" section in GRAD or search for them in the search box.
- From the PGR’s main project page Select “Thesis Examination” then select the “Thesis submission” workflow.
- A PDF copy of the thesis will be available when you select “Thesis”.

The Chair should record in their report their experience of the video streaming arrangements and that they were satisfied with the overall conduct of the viva.