



University of
St Andrews

Use of videoconferencing in a Viva

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2.1	Changes to Associate Provost titles	Approved	Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	03/08/2021

Guidelines on the use of video conferencing in a viva

1. Introduction

The University prefers that the viva be held on University premises with all appointed examiners and the candidate present in the room. In some circumstances, however, it may not be feasible for all viva participants to be physically present in St Andrews and one or more may need to engage in the viva remotely. The preferred arrangement in such cases is still for the candidate and internal examiner to be together in St Andrews while the external examiner joins remotely. If travel restrictions or other external limitations make it impossible for the candidate and internal examiner to be together, the Associate Provost Students may grant permission for all participants to join the viva remotely.

If the candidate is uncomfortable with an online viva, the Associate Provost Students may grant permission for the viva to be postponed until all parties can be present in St Andrews. In this case, arrangements may need to be agreed with the sponsors (e.g. research council, charitable trust) of externally funded candidates. International candidates on a student visa should contact [International Advice](#) to discuss any potential consequences of postponing their viva.

2. During the Covid-19 (coronavirus) crisis

For the Academic Year 2020/21, and the duration of the consequences of the Coronavirus crisis, all viva examinations will be conducted online with the internal examiner, candidate and external examiner all connecting from different places. All other University policies, in particular those on good academic practice and the conduct of viva examinations, remain unaffected.

3. Approval and Scheduling

The request for holding a viva remotely should be submitted at the same time as the examining committee nomination, or as soon as possible after it becomes clear that a face-to-face viva cannot proceed as planned. Permission must be obtained from the Associate Provost Students and no examination arrangements should be made prior to receiving this approval. The following information should be sent with the request:

- The reason for requesting remote participation
- Where each of the participants will be located. Participants based in St Andrews should give a building and room number.
- Which software application and equipment is to be used
- Written confirmation from all participants that they are prepared to proceed remotely (this should be collated by the Convenor).

In cases where someone will be joining from a different time zone, time differences must be taken in to account when scheduling the viva.

A viva conducted remotely should otherwise be comparable to a viva held within the University. This means that the conditions should be similar to those used for face-to-face vivas and there should be no disruptions during the examination. The examiners must ensure that they can speak privately before the viva to agree the structure of the examination, the form and sequence of the questions, and who will take the lead at various stages of the viva. The examiners will also need to confer privately at the end of the examination.

Recording of the viva is not normally permitted and can only be done if all participants agree to the recording.

4. Technology

The preferred software for remote vivas is Microsoft Teams. All parties should ensure that they are familiar with this software and how it runs on their own devices before the viva takes place. Resources and support for Microsoft Teams meetings can be found on the [University webpages](#). If required, contact the [IT Service Desk](#) to arrange an online tutorial.

Candidates who require to share a whiteboard during the viva should screen-share in the Teams meeting and then select the MS Whiteboard app. Mac users should run Teams in a browser and not use the desktop client if whiteboard sharing is required.

Where adequate whiteboard sharing cannot be achieved using the above method, candidates could consider using one of the following hardware options for input:

(a) using a tablet to write on, (b) having a small whiteboard to write on and hold to a camera, or (c) a webcam pointing at the desk

The examiners and candidate can agree to use different software for the viva, but should be aware that the University may not be able to provide training and support. Please consult the University's [guidance on audio and video conferencing](#) for further advice on other supported software.

5. Before the Viva

The examiners should arrange to meet privately in advance of the viva so that they can agree the structure of the examination and their line of questioning. They will need to meet privately again after the viva to agree their recommendation and feedback.

The internal examiner and candidate may want to arrange a test call to check the connection and ensure they know how to work necessary components.

Participants should agree backup plans in case of interruptions due to technological issues. Alternate plans may include moving to a different platform (e.g., Skype for Business, VScene), switching to a conference call via telephone, or rescheduling for a later date.

6. The Viva

1. Allow plenty of time for all participants, particularly the candidate, to feel comfortable with the format of the examination.
2. The viva should run in the usual way, in accordance with the Assessment of postgraduate research students policy.
3. Ensure that participants know that they may take breaks during the viva.
4. Candidates may have a support person with them during the viva if they wish. This person can be another academic, a representative from Student Services, or a friend or family member. The examiners should be notified at the start of the call that a support person is present or on standby. The support person cannot take part in the formal examination in any way, and is there solely to provide moral support.
5. Ensure that all participants have access to drinking water and anything else they may need during the viva.
6. At the end of the examination, the examiners should ask the candidate to leave the meeting so that they can confer privately.
7. Once the examiners have agreed the outcome, the candidate should be invited back to the meeting to hear the result. The Convener should ensure that all participants know exactly what will happen next, including timescales for the candidate to receive the examiner's report.
8. Consider how to celebrate a positive outcome, or how to support the student if the outcome is not what they were expecting. You may wish to have the supervisor on standby and invite them to join the call to hear the final outcome.
9. Should it become impossible to continue the viva at any point due to technological problems, the Convener will advise participants to move to the backup plan. Any problems or interruptions due to technology issues should be clearly detailed in the examiners' report.

7. Appeals

Following the oral examination, but prior to the examiners delivering their recommendation, all participants should be asked to confirm that the video conferencing had no substantive bearing on the examination process. This should be explicitly recorded in the examiners' report.

Having agreed to a remote viva, the candidate cannot use this as grounds for a later appeal except in instances of technical failure or other unforeseen circumstances beyond the control of the examiners where no reasonable allowance was made. If the candidate deems their performance to have been adversely affected by technical difficulties or other unforeseen circumstances they should raise this concern during the examination so that it can be noted in the examiners' report.

Guidance for candidates preparing for a remote viva

The following guidance is for candidates whose viva will be held remotely. Please also read the guidance above and contact your supervisor if you have any concerns.

The suggestions below can help create a more positive experience for your remote viva, but are not requirements and do not constitute grounds for appeal if they are not in place.

Before the viva

1. You are permitted to contact your internal examiner with questions about the viva process and it may be helpful to arrange a mock viva with your supervisor beforehand.
2. Make yourself familiar with Microsoft Teams, or whatever platform you will be using. Know where to find basic controls like mute, screen share and audio and video settings.
3. Make sure you pick a comfortable environment for your viva, where you will not be interrupted, where there is no background noise and you have a good internet connection. Sit with a blank wall behind you so that examiners aren't distracted by your background and avoid sitting in front of a light source, as this creates glare. Raise your computer up so that your webcam is at the level of your eyes, a much more comfortable position for what will be a long discussion.
4. Use your laptop or desktop computer instead of a phone. A headset with microphone is useful to avoid feedback.
5. It may be helpful to have a hard copy of your thesis for referencing during the viva. Open up any documents you will need during the viva beforehand so that these are easily accessible during the viva. Close any applications or documents that will not be required during your viva. Have some paper and pens ready for taking notes and any other materials you may need during the viva.
6. If you think you may have difficulties with your internet connection, you might wish to consider a wired internet connection as this is always more stable than wifi.
7. Ensure that you have enough drinking water available to last throughout the viva.
8. Look directly into the webcam when you are giving your answers.

The Viva

1. You may request to have a support person with you during your viva. They should take no part in the formal examination, but are there to provide moral support. If it is not possible to have a person with you, you may wish to have someone 'standing by' on the phone or via video conferencing, especially at the end of the viva.
2. Using technology for your viva could present practical challenges, but if everyone involved in the viva is patient, keeps calm and approaches it with

good humour, the technology shouldn't add to the stress. As in face to face vivas, it is not a problem to pause: while considering an examiner's question; while waiting for them to respond or ask the next question; or to ask them to repeat a question if you haven't understood.

3. The Convener is responsible for the smooth running of the viva and their role includes ensuring the technology is working correctly, that all participants are comfortable and can work the technology, and most importantly that you are happy with the process. If you need a break, or have any other problems, just ask the Convener if they can pause the viva briefly.
4. It is important to make sure that you are not interrupted during the viva (have your phone in silent mode) and that your environment is as quiet as possible.

After the Viva

1. Remember to celebrate! Just because it is done remotely doesn't mean your viva is any less of an accomplishment!

Version number	Purpose / changes	Document status	Author of changes, role and school / unit	Date
1.0	New guidance		Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	01/06/2017
2.0	Expanded guidance, including advice for students and arrangements for Covid-19.		Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	06/07/2020
2.1	Changes to Associate Provost titles	Approved	Emily Feamster, Academic Policy Officer, Principal's Office	03/08/2021