

Conducting Remote Vivas – Information and Responsibilities for Supervisors, Students and Examiners

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Now that vivas are to be conducted remotely until further notice, we have provided the following suggestions to help you prepare for and cope with the experience. The remote viva differs in some ways from the traditional face-to-face format - whether you're a student, examiner, or supervisor, there are new protocols involved. Some will initially see the remote viva as a more intimidating prospect than a face to face viva, while some will find it more comfortable. This guidance is designed to help all involved to put students at ease while following the University's regulations.

The following suggestions for all those involved are intended to be read in conjunction with the Handbook for Examiners of Research Degrees by Theses [<https://www.ncl.ac.uk/students/progress/student-resources/PGR/Publications.htm>], and alongside any additional information about individual students' circumstances which has been made available to examiners.

Supervisors:

- As is usual practice, **you are responsible for overseeing the arrangement of time, date, and format of the viva** with the student and examiners. However, the internal examiner is responsible for organising the Zoom meeting and sending detailed joining instructions (meeting ID and password for extra security) to all parties.
- Be aware of any particular wellbeing/stress issues for the student, and let the Graduate School know about these well before the viva.
- It is very helpful to students for supervisors to hold a viva preparation meeting or practice viva, to help them get comfortable with the technology as well as prepare for possible questions.
- The student may wish their supervisor to sit in on all or part of the viva. If so, the supervisors should mute and blank their video. You may re-enable audio and video in the second part of the viva where feedback is communicated.
- Make sure you or another member of the supervisory team are available immediately after the viva to debrief/support the student.

Students:

Remember: as with all vivas at Newcastle, the primary aims of the remote viva are to clarify anything that is unclear to the examiners and to satisfy them that the thesis is your own work. It is not to catch you out or to "grill" you for the sake of it. The examiners have already done most of the examining by the time they talk to you. You can expect the discussion to be professional and considerate, and to take account of the context of a remote viva.

Arrangements and Preparation: Remote vivas at Newcastle will take place via Zoom. You will be sent an invitation to the meeting from the internal examiner which will contain joining instructions (meeting ID and password).

- You do not need an account to join a Zoom meeting but as a Newcastle University student, you can register for an account and this will allow you to practice more easily before the viva: <https://videoconferencing.ncl.ac.uk/softwareolutions/zoom/>

- Take some time to (re)familiarise yourself with Zoom - check your equipment, internet and surroundings in the days before the viva. See suggestions for EVERYONE below.
- On the day, have everything you need at hand - your thesis, water, notepad, etc, as well as your University Smart Card for an identity check at the start of the viva.

Practice: Ask your supervisors for a practice viva a week or two before the viva date. You should notify your supervisor **in advance of the viva** if there are personal circumstances which may affect your performance in the viva.

Afterwards: A remote viva can leave you with a sense of anti-climax - make sure your support system of friends, family and colleagues know it's your viva day, so you can chat and celebrate with them. Take especial care of yourself both before and after the viva, as it's common to feel exhausted afterwards. An initial debrief with your supervisors is a good idea, while talking over any problem areas or plans for revisions can be done on another day with a clear head.

Examiners:

Arrangements: Remote vivas are arranged by supervisors in discussion with you and the student. The timing should take account of timezone differences and any constraints on students such as childcare.

The internal examiner is responsible for organising the Zoom meeting and sending everyone detailed joining instructions (meeting ID and password for extra security). It is a good idea to communicate a maximum length for the viva, as well as the break for conferring and communication of feedback, to all parties.

Preparation: Ensure you are thoroughly practised in using Zoom, so you can more easily run the meeting, and advise students if technical issues arise. See suggestions for "Everyone" below.

Pre-viva meeting: The standard examiners' pre-viva meeting should be held prior to the viva so that the examiners can check audio/video, compare notes, plan the order of questions, including how to deal with spontaneous questions, etc. **Ensure the 'waiting room' function in Zoom is enabled** to ensure the candidate cannot inadvertently enter the meeting and overhear deliberations, either at this stage or after the viva.

During the viva: Give a friendly welcome, time for introductions, and clear instructions to all taking part – this is even more important with a remote viva, to build rapport and put the student at ease.

- Conduct the identity check, by either:
 - Asking the student to show their University Smart Card, or alternatively
 - Checking the student's photograph on PGR ePortfolio
- Explain the process and confirm how long it is likely to take, whether breaks are built in, etc. Cover etiquette matters, such as whether and how to interject when someone else is talking.
- Set expectations about the process for dealing with technical problems if they arise. Ensure you have email addresses / phone numbers for all parties.
- The viva proper should proceed with less challenging questions to start with, to put the student at ease. The guidance in the Handbook (link above) on good practice and poor practice in viva questioning applies to remote vivas.
- Remember: it is acceptable for students to pause and think before answering questions, to ask for clarification, or to request a short comfort break. Agree length of any break, and leave the Zoom connection on.

Conferral and feedback to candidate: When the main part of the viva is complete, and the examiners are ready to break to confer, make clear to the student when and how they should rejoin the meeting to receive feedback (and enable the 'waiting room function' while they are out).

Everyone:

Before the viva:

- Equipment - a PC/laptop (note: Zoom has reduced functionality on tablets/ smart phones); speakers (or headset/ earphones) with microphone, and a webcam (integral to device or standalone).
- Feel confident using Zoom – (re)familiarise yourself. Instructions for Windows, Mac, iOS, Android available from <https://support.zoom.us>. Remember to test your audio and webcam via <https://zoom.us/test> a few days before, and ahead of the meeting.
- Surroundings - find a quiet location and/or consider using headphones with microphone. Make sure your screen/webcam is on a stable surface. Is the room light/warm/cool enough? Is anything distracting in view? How much of you will be visible (e.g. will others be able to see your body language as well as your face?)

During the viva:

- Check everyone can hear/ see each other, and allow time to test audio.
- Pause regularly in case of audio/ video lag, and point out any technical problems as soon as they arise.
- Refer clearly to particular sections/page numbers of the thesis (where appropriate), and wait for everyone to catch up.
- Use positive body language so others know you are listening. Be mindful that both student and examiners may not pick up on non-verbal cues as easily as in-person vivas. Make sure everyone can see each other clearly, and strike a balance between looking at the camera and watching participants' body language.
- Do not record the viva.