

Guidance for examiners of research degree theses

1. What is a viva?

- 1.1 A viva voce is an oral examination (usually referred to as a viva). It is usually part of the final assessment process for PhD and professional doctorate candidates.
- 1.2 The main purpose of a viva is to assess the candidate's research and subject knowledge. The viva will generally be conducted by an external examiner and an internal examiner. Where the doctoral candidate is also a member of staff, it is usual for the viva to be conducted by two external examiners.

2. Preparing for the viva

- 2.1 The NTU Doctoral School will send out the theses of research degree doctoral candidates to the examining team after the examining team has been formally approved by the Chair of the School Research Degrees Committee (SRDC) and the associated Human Resources right to work checks have been completed.
- 2.2 Each examiner will be sent:
 - a. a copy of the doctoral candidate's thesis;
 - b. details of the other members of the examining team;
 - c. a copy of the examiners' report template;
 - d. a form and guidance for claiming fees and expenses (external examiners only).
- 2.3 Examiners will be notified by email when the thesis has been issued.

Completing the pre-viva report

- 2.4 Each examiner is required to read and examine the thesis and complete an independent preliminary report (RD8PR) at the latest a week before the oral examination is held.
- 2.5 The examiner's preliminary report should consider whether the thesis satisfies the requirements of the degree, i.e., whether the doctoral candidate has demonstrated a broad knowledge and understanding of their discipline and has applied the associated research techniques, as appropriate. The examiner should highlight in their report any particular issues that they would like to draw out in the viva exam, and where possible make an appropriate provisional recommendation subject to the outcome of the oral examination.
- 2.6 For a practice-based degree, the pre-viva report should consider both the thesis and the practical element, as appropriate.

- 2.7 Examiners should complete the preliminary reports independently and without formal or informal consultation between examiners.
- 2.8 Examiners should return their signed pre-viva reports to the NTU Doctoral School. A template of the pre-viva report is sent to examiners along with the thesis submission.

Arranging the viva exam

- 2.9 The NTU Doctoral School is responsible for arranging the viva exam and making any specific arrangements relating to the assessment of the practical element of a practice-based degree submission.
- 2.10 In very exceptional circumstances, Directors of Studies / Lead Supervisors may need to request that viva exams are held off-campus. Exceptional circumstances do not include instances such as inclement weather, illness by any member of the examining team, conflicting engagements, or financial issues.
- 2.11 Where an off-campus viva is being sought, the request should be made to the NTU Doctoral School on the RD6E examiners approval form.
- 2.12 During unprecedented times (e.g. COVID-19) and the requirement for offsite working, remote vivas are permitted and a process is in place in accordance with NTU regulations.

3. The viva exam

- 3.1 The purpose of the viva exam is to:
 - a. provide the candidate with an opportunity to defend their thesis;
 - b. satisfy the examiners that the thesis is the candidate's own work;
 - c. satisfy the examiners that the doctoral candidate has a good understanding of their work and where it sits in relation to the wider research field;
 - d. establish whether the thesis is of a sufficiently high standard to merit the award of the degree for which it is submitted;
 - e. allow the doctoral candidate to clarify and develop the written thesis in response to the examiners' questions.
- 3.2 The oral examination should be held in a suitable room without interruptions from others.
- 3.3 The viva exam should be a positive experience for the doctoral candidate and should be conducted in a fair, transparent, and professional manner. The doctoral candidate should be put at their ease as far as possible during the exam.
- 3.4 The independent chair, internal examiner, external examiner(s) and candidate must be present. If any of those who should be attending are unable to be present, then the oral examination must be re-arranged.
- 3.5 There is no formal procedure laid down for the conduct of the viva examination. Some examiners prefer to work through the thesis in the order in which it is written. Other examiners prefer to discuss topics. Normally, a doctoral candidate will be asked to prepare a presentation of their work in a suitable format.
- 3.6 It is considered good practice for the examining team to meet before the viva to discuss how the examination will be conducted. The Independent Chair needs to ensure that time should be made available on the day of, and before the oral examination, for examiners to be fully briefed about the regulations under which the

candidate is being examined, and to discuss their preliminary reports and the approach to the examination.

4. Examiner responsibilities

4.1 Independent Chairs are responsible for:

- a. ensuring that examiners are familiar with regulations specifically relating to available award descriptions and viva outcomes
- b. providing the examining team with administrative and/or procedural advice as needed
- c. ensuring that the examination is conducted with due regard to fair play and in compliance with NTU regulations
- d. submitting an Independent Chair's report detailing the conduct of the viva which should take place in a professional, fair and transparent manner
- e. ensuring that the examining team's joint decision on outcome of the viva exam is consistent with approved award descriptions and NTU regulations
- f. monitoring the completion of reports relating to minor or substantive revisions and coordinating actions to be taken in response to any resubmission required of the doctoral candidate.

4.2 Internal examiners are responsible for:

- a. undertaking an assessment of the thesis in advance of the viva exam and completing an independent pre-viva report which must be submitted to the NTU Doctoral School at the latest one week before the viva takes place
- b. conducting the viva exam with the external examiner(s) and agreeing a joint decision with them
- c. advising the doctoral candidate of the decision made by the examining team
- d. providing the doctoral candidate with a verbal report (minor amendments) or written report (substantive amendments or referral for resubmission) on the amendments required by the examining team
- e. preparing a post-viva report with the external examiner(s) and submitting this to the NTU Doctoral School including a written report on amendments required by the examining team
- f. assessing the amendments made by the doctoral candidate and confirming whether these have satisfactorily complied with the amendments required by examining team
- g. assessing the resubmitted thesis and, if needed, conducting a further viva exam if the examining team has decided that the doctoral candidate should be referred for resubmission.

4.3 External examiners are responsible for:

- a. familiarising themselves with UK and NTU regulations specifically relating to the assessment process and available award descriptions and viva outcomes, seeking guidance from the Independent Chair as appropriate
- b. undertaking an assessment of the thesis in advance of the viva exam and completing an independent pre-viva report which must be submitted to the NTU Doctoral School at the latest one week before the viva takes place

- c. conducting the viva exam with the internal examiner and agreeing a joint decision with them
- d. agreeing with the internal examiner the amendments that the doctoral candidate will be asked to make
- e. preparing a joint post-viva report with the internal examiner
- f. assessing the amendments made by the doctoral candidate and then confirming whether these have satisfactorily complied with the amendments required by the examining team
- g. assessing the resubmitted thesis and, if needed, conducting a further viva exam if the examining team has decided that the doctoral candidate should be referred for resubmission.

5. Amendments after the viva exam

5.1 Amendments after the viva exam are categorised into:

- a. Minor: The thesis is generally acceptable, and the candidate should not be required to undertake any further research. Amendments are largely of a clerical in nature and may include corrections to references and/or diagrams and the re-writing of small sections of text to improve descriptions or explanations.
- b. Substantive: Amendments are in excess of minor corrections but not sufficient to require revision and resubmission of the thesis. Corrections are more substantial and may involve re-writing parts of the thesis, correction of calculations or amendment of arguments.
- c. Referral for resubmission: A referral for resubmission should be made where the examining team agrees that the doctoral candidate should undertake further research or repeat completed research and/or re-write or restructure large parts of the thesis.

Timescales

5.2 The timescales for completing the amendments are:

- Minor: 1-3 months from the date of the viva for full time doctoral candidates; up to six months for part-time doctoral candidates
- Substantive: 3-6 months from the date that the NTU Doctoral School formally advises the doctoral candidate in writing for full-time doctoral candidates; up to 12 months for part-time doctoral candidates
- Referral from resubmissions: 6-12 months from the date that the NTU Doctoral School formally advises the doctoral candidate in writing.

5.3 Where a referral for resubmission is required the examining team will need to determine whether a further viva exam is needed. This decision shall be taken once all examiners have had the opportunity to assess the resubmitted thesis. The second viva exam should normally take place within three months of the NTU Doctoral School issuing the resubmitted thesis.

Advising the doctoral candidate

- 5.4 The examining team should give details of minor amendments to the doctoral candidate at the viva exam. The required amendments should be outlined on the joint report form together with the amendments period. The NTU Doctoral School will write to the doctoral candidate upon receipt of the completed and signed joint report and confirm the amendments to be completed, the timescale for completing these and advise the doctoral candidate that they should pass their completed amendments to the NTU Doctoral School. The NTU Doctoral School will then disseminate the amendments to the examiners for assessment.
- 5.5 The examining team should outline details of substantive amendments on the joint report form together with the amendments period. The NTU Doctoral School will write to the doctoral candidate upon receipt of the completed and signed joint report and confirm the amendments to be completed, the timescale for completing these and advise the doctoral candidate that they should pass their amendments to the NTU Doctoral School. The NTU Doctoral School will then disseminate the amendments to the examiners for assessment.
- 5.6 Where examiners are referring the doctoral candidate for resubmission the required amendments should be outlined on the joint report form together with the amendments period. The NTU Doctoral School will write to the doctoral candidate upon receipt of the completed and signed joint report and confirm the amendments to be completed and the timescale for completing these and for submitting the theses to the NTU Doctoral School for re-assessment.