

Preparing for Virtual Viva Voce Examinations

Advice and Guidance for PGRs

In the coming weeks, some postgraduate researchers will find themselves preparing to undertake their viva voce examination virtually. If this applies to you, then it is almost certainly not what you expected when you imagined your viva just a few months ago.

We have prepared this advice to demystify the idea of a 'virtual viva', and to provide some potentially useful tips to help you feel confident and empowered in preparing for your viva. But it is important to remember that the fundamentals of the viva are the same whether it is conducted face-to-face or virtually. Although the medium will be different, the content of your viva will be the same as it would have been face-to-face. Any preparation you have already undertaken will be just as relevant, as will be any advice you have already received.

This guidance is written for postgraduate researchers for whom virtual viva arrangements are already in place. If you are unsure about any aspect of the arrangements for your viva, please consult with your supervisor in the first instance, and refer to the University's [official Coronavirus FAQs for postgraduate research students](#).

In drawing up this advice we have consulted with researchers who have experienced virtual viva examinations, as well as referring to other sources including the UK Council for Graduate Education guide to [Conducting Vivas Online](#).

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Things you can do before the viva

Arrange a mock viva

Mock viva sessions are a great way to prepare for your viva in any circumstances, but if you are getting ready to be examined virtually then arranging some opportunities to practise virtually will be particularly worthwhile.

Speak to your supervisory team and ask if you can arrange a mock viva with them – thanks to their familiarity with your project, they will have a good idea of the types of question you may be asked.

You can also arrange a mock viva with a member of the Researcher Development Programme team. To request a mock viva, email RDP@surrey.ac.uk

It really helped having a virtual mock viva with RDP, for me to see how I could respond and construct arguments. I'd recommend a virtual mock viva if they are nervous about it being online.

Postgraduate Researcher

Become confident with the technology

Try to get as accustomed to video-conferencing as you can. In addition to your mock viva(s), arrange some conversations with supportive friends or family members – preferably using the same video-conferencing service you will be using in the viva.

Ask for any useful feedback, particularly on audio quality. Can they hear you a little more clearly if you sit closer to the microphone? Is it helpful if you slow down your speech or allow more pauses?

Use the time to make sure you're familiar with any useful settings. For example, it is usually possible to adjust your own view to reduce the size of the window showing your own face, or hide it entirely. Some people feel more comfortable doing this as it can feel unnatural to view your own face while you're speaking.

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Prepare just as you would for a face-to-face viva

As we said above, in its fundamental aspects a virtual viva is the same as a face-to-face viva. Your examiners will have exactly the same types of questions, and any preparation you have already planned to do will be just as relevant. Refamiliarise yourself with your thesis, be confident in the work you have done, and be prepared for a range of questions about:

- **The novelty of your research** – How does the project contribute to knowledge in your field? Have you applied a new method to an existing problem? Do your findings advance understanding of the topic?
- **Your understanding and use of existing literature** – What are the most significant gaps in the literature and how does your project address them? Which papers most influenced your research and why?
- **Your research design/method/methodology** – Why did you do what you did? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach? What alternatives were there and why did you reject them?
- **Your conclusion or findings** – What are your most important results? What makes them significant and how have you demonstrated this?
- **The limitations of your project** – No research project is perfect. What work was outside of the scope of your project, but could be done in future to take it further? What would you do differently if you were designing the project again?

I think in terms of the questions examiners asked, it is not so different than the normal viva. After the initial questions, I didn't even concentrate on the fact that my examiners weren't physically in the room.

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Things you can do on the day of the viva

Prepare your space

Lay out a notebook and pen, glass of water, and any other notes you may wish to refer to (remember that the viva is an 'open book' examination, so supplementary materials are permitted). If you have been able to print a hard-copy of your thesis, have it to hand. If you have been unable to print your thesis, have the file open on your PC, or on a tablet, so you are able to refer to specific parts of the thesis.

Where possible, try to optimise the space in which you'll be undertaking the viva. If you have the option, choose somewhere where the lighting is good, and you are least likely to be disturbed. But only do what you can – everyone involved will recognise the challenging circumstances, and no examiner will be concerned about the décor in your room.

Minimise distractions

It can be a good idea to turn off messaging notifications on your phone, tablet and computer, and to turn your phone on to silent. Keep your phone in view, however, in case your examination team needs to contact you.

Do what you can to reduce the likelihood of interruptions from children, pets, or housemates. But if there are things you cannot change or fully control, acknowledge them and don't worry. Remember that your examiners will be more than aware of the challenging circumstances; indeed, they will be managing similar challenges themselves.

Also, it's best to be ready for any unforeseen circumstances and/or interruptions. It's okay if they happen. They did happen in my case (my examiner's son interrupted and the office phone rang) and it was okay to wait a little and then return to your answers.

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Ask questions, ask for a break

Everyone understands that audio quality can fluctuate on a video-conference, so don't hesitate to ask an examiner to repeat a question, or to clarify what they are asking. In fact it's often good to rephrase the question back to the examiner to confirm what they're asking before you begin to answer.

A virtual viva may go on longer than it would have done face-to-face – time can be taken up with initial technical set-up, and communication can be less fluid over webcam. It is perfectly fine to request a break; indeed it may be welcomed by the examiners as well.

Allow pauses and breaths

Try to build some pauses into your responses – allow yourself a few breaths, and the examiners a moment to digest what you've said, before continuing. If you have been talking for a while but feel like there is more you could say, you can pause and ask your examiners if they would like you to continue.

I'd definitely recommend being confident and trying to have a lively discussion however stressful the environment is. I took my time to refer to my work and construct my answer, so it's totally okay if one needs to think things over for a specific question.

Postgraduate Researcher

Stay calm and positive

Don't worry if you're finding it hard to gauge how things are going during the viva. Video-conferencing can make it slightly more difficult to read visual cues such as body language, whilst some examiners might avoid making small interjections or encouraging noises so as not to interrupt your responses. Indeed, even in a face-to-face viva it can often be difficult for candidates to judge this – different examiners have different approaches and demeanours.

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Things you can do after your viva

Get support if you need it

These are undoubtedly difficult and unprecedented times in which to undergo a viva. But despite the circumstances, and whatever the outcome of your viva, there is a wide range of support available for you to draw upon. Conversations with your supervisory team will help you process the experience, and they can offer guidance to help you work your way through any corrections or revisions you have been asked to complete.

The Researcher Development team in the Doctoral College are available for one-to-one consultations to provide additional advice and support. You also have access to the full range of RDP workshops, as well as virtual writing retreats and other activities, while you are working on any corrections. You can also draw upon the confidential professional support available from the [Centre for Wellbeing](#).

Find ways to celebrate

Coming to the end of a doctorate is an extraordinary achievement under any circumstances. Every postgraduate researcher's experience is different, and each encounters challenges and adversity along the way. Submitting your thesis and undertaking your viva in these difficult times, however, is something to be particularly proud of, and you should celebrate it however you can -- even if you cannot (yet) go out for that celebratory meal you had always pictured.

If there is one thing that is universally welcome right now, it is good news – and there is a small army of people out there, from your close friends and family to researchers online you have never met, sending you encouragement and waiting to celebrate your achievement.