

## **VIVA POLICY AND GUIDANCE - UPDATED OCTOBER 2021**

### **1. PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT**

This document sets out the University of Sheffield's revised policy and guidance on undertaking viva voce examinations. It has been updated to reflect changes made to vivas following the Covid-19 pandemic and national lockdowns, which has led to more flexibility in the range of options available for undertaking vivas.

### **2. VIVA FORMAT**

UPGRC has agreed that viva voce examinations can continue to be held in a variety of formats, depending on the preference of the student and needs of all participants, although face-to-face vivas will be the expectation in most cases. It has also been agreed that all viva examinations will continue to be recorded, irrespective of their format.

The following viva formats are permitted:

- Face-to-face vivas, i.e. all participants are present in Sheffield
- Remote vivas
- Hybrid vivas, i.e. one participant attends remotely, and others are present together in Sheffield. This could be the student or an examiner.

Where a remote or hybrid viva is agreed, this requires approval, but a 'light touch' approval by the department is sufficient.

It is essential that discussions take place with the student and examiners at the appointment stage, or as soon as possible thereafter, to agree what format the viva will take and to ensure that all participants understand the processes and the requirement for a recording to be made. The student's needs and preferences should be the foremost consideration when agreeing the format of the viva.

### **3. MEANS OF RECORDING VIVAS**

It has been agreed that vivas should continue to be recorded using Blackboard Collaborate, in all cases, as this technology is now familiar, secure, and readily available. Remote and hybrid vivas would need to continue to use this platform anyway, but this also includes vivas that are taking place face-to-face, although only an audio recording is required for a face-to-face viva.

### **4. PURPOSE OF THE RECORDING**

The recording (audio or audio-visual) provides an objective record of an oral examination that can be used in the event of a subsequent academic appeal or complaint. The recording will not be copied or replayed, except in the event of an appeal or complaint, or where there are conflicting examiner recommendations (see next paragraph). In the event of a complaint or an appeal, the recording will not be made available to either the student or the student's academic department, but it may be listened to by the person responsible for considering the appeal or complaint, i.e. the Faculty Officer, or the VP/DVP for Research in the event of a

Case Review. Only the official recording is permitted; participants are not permitted to make their own recordings. Access to viva recordings is not permitted in the event of a Subject Access Request.

The recording may also be used in the rare event that the examiners are unable to agree between themselves whether the candidate has satisfied the requirements for a particular degree and cannot reach a joint decision regarding the recommended outcome of the viva. In such cases a third examiner, who is external to the University, will be appointed. The third examiner would be able to listen to the recording of the viva when considering their decision. This may obviate the need for the student to undergo a separate viva with the third examiner.

All participants should be notified in advance that the viva will be recorded and that the recording will be held in confidence and only accessed under the circumstances outlined above. Examiners should be notified when they are approached to examine, and this will also be included in their Appointment Letter. Students should be informed at an early stage by their academic department.

It will still be necessary to collect a certain amount of details from participants to enable the recording equipment to be set up; much of this can be done via the Appointment of Examiners form; however details regarding the date and time of the viva will need to be collected separately in order for Blackboard to be set up.

## **5. RESPONSIBILITY FOR RECORDINGS**

The responsibility for recording, storing, and deleting recordings will rest with Faculty Graduate Schools, in collaboration with academic departments. Internal examiners (or co-ordinators, where appointed), will need to start the recording at the beginning of the viva, as they have been doing remotely.

All recordings should be removed from Blackboard and saved to a secure folder. Viva recordings must be securely stored, with access limited to those who require it, e.g. the departmental administrator, and retained for a period of six months after the student has either been awarded their degree or has left the University.

## **6. EXCEPTIONS TO RECORDING**

It is recognised that there may be rare cases where the process of recording the viva might present the student with difficulties, either medical or psychological. In such cases, the student may request that the viva recording be substituted by an independent observer who will take abridged notes of the viva. Any requests will require faculty approval and the presentation of evidence, e.g. medical evidence.

It is an expectation of the appointment of examiners that they agree to the viva being recorded. Where an examiner is approached and does not agree to this, then an alternative examiner should be sought. If this is not possible, then, as per the conditions for the student

above, any requests must be fully justified and evidenced and will require faculty approval and the appointment of an independent observer.

## **7. CONFIRMATION REVIEW VIVAS**

It is expected that Confirmation Review vivas will revert to being held face-to-face, other than in exceptional cases, e.g. if a student is out of the UK and unable to travel back for their Confirmation Review viva.

The first attempt of the Confirmation Review examination is not required to be recorded. If a second attempt is required, it must be recorded, regardless of whether it is face-to-face or remote. The second attempt of the Confirmation Review must be conducted via Blackboard Collaborate, in accordance with the procedures for final vivas.