

Progression viva guidance¹

This document is primarily aimed at progression viva panels although students may find it useful when preparing for the viva. A summary of individual responsibilities is provided as an appendix.

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Progression

Only PhD and professional doctorate students need undertake a progression examination.

Students seeking progression must submit a progression application. Normally, such applications should be submitted no later than eighteen months from first enrolment for full-time students or thirty-six months for part-time.² All applications require the support of the supervisory team.

¹ This guidance also applies to transfer vivas. Transfer applies to students who enrolled on MPhil/PhD and who are seeking transfer of their registration from MPhil to PhD. The process for a transfer viva is exactly the same as for a progression viva.

² These are the maximum periods before submission. Submissions must be provided no later than 23.59 on the deadline date. However, students would normally be expected to submit for progression after fifteen months of full-time study or twenty-four months of part-time study.

Viva arrangements

The organisation of the viva is the responsibility of the faculty. The supervisory team will agree a date and time with the examiners and student for the viva to take place within six weeks of the submission, while the faculty administrator will arrange a chair, book the room and ensure water is available during the examination.

Composition of the viva panel

The progression viva panel comprises:

- an independent chair appointed by the faculty from an approved list;
- one of the student's supervisors (normally, although not necessarily, Director of Studies); and
- an examiner external to the University with relevant subject knowledge, selected by the supervisory team.

Both examiners must be research active, and the external examiner and chair must have had no prior involvement with the project.

Progression viva examiners need to be reviewed by the Graduate School in advance of the submission to ensure any conflict of interests are reviewed. Supervisors should submit a [progression viva examination team form \(RO-GRA-31F\)](#) to the faculty administrator, and Graduate School, for review 3 months prior to submission. Supervisors should note that examiners cannot be used on more than one viva per project.

Role of the viva chair

The main functions of the independent chair are to ensure that:

- the appropriate academic regulations are followed;
- the viva is conducted in a civil and appropriate manner (interrogative rather than interrogational);
- the event results in a decision – be it positive or negative – by assisting, advising and, where necessary, influencing the panel; and
- there is an independent written record of the event should something go wrong.³

The chair is not *required* to read the submission, and plays no part in the academic examination. The chair is nevertheless *encouraged* to read the submission in order to better understand the context of the examiners' questions and to facilitate their record keeping.

Please note: all chairs must have completed viva training from the Graduate School within the past 3 years. If you have not been trained, please contact graduateschool@edgehill.ac.uk to book on **prior to** acting as a Chair.

³ The chair's notes remain confidential to the chair unless there is an appeal (within ten days) or complaint (within three months). In cases where the chair leaves the University within the complaint period, arrangements for securing access to, and the destruction of, the notes should be made between the chair and the Director of the Graduate School.

Documentation

Applications to progress should include:

- a [submission cover sheet](#) (RO-GRA-01F),
- a sample draft chapter from the thesis,
- written confirmation from the relevant research ethics committee that the project has undergone ethical scrutiny and, where appropriate, ethical approval has been given, and
- a report of no more than 6,000 words outlining:
 - Progress to date in the literature review, methodological development and data collection
 - The original contribution to knowledge that will be made by the research
 - The written work to date, its form and whether it has been seen and commented on by supervisors
 - The timetable for thesis submission
 - A detailed plan of the final thesis structure.

Aims of the viva

The viva panel should seek to establish that:

- the student shows evidence of having made appropriate progress in their research to date;
- the proposed original contribution to knowledge is of sufficient significance to suggest that, if the research is completed as proposed, the student will produce a thesis appropriate for submission; and
- the student displays (in their written work and in responses to questioning and discussion) the skills necessary to produce a successful doctoral submission.

If the panel is satisfied that all these requirements have been met, there is no reason not to recommend progression.

Conduct of the viva

The panel should meet in advance to plan the specific form of the viva. This will normally be immediately prior to the viva, but in exceptional circumstances need not be. The chair should aim to conclude the viva within 75 minutes (excluding any pre-meeting of the panel).

Before the viva

The chair and examiners should:

- note the range of possible outcomes from the viva, listed on the viva chair's report form and below;

- remember that the viva is an integral part of the examination, so they must not tell the student their decision before the viva is completed – a decision and recommendation to the Graduate School Board of Studies can only follow the viva;
- set the agenda for the viva, ensuring any obstacles to success are discussed in the viva;
- agree how the panel will manage the detailed questioning;
- remember that the student can only be asked to make revisions (other than trivial corrections) that have been raised in the viva and thereby discussed.

During the viva

The chair should begin the viva by explaining the examination process and the format of the viva:

- **Formal introductions**, and a brief explanation of the roles of viva chair and examiner, are helpful in setting the 'tone' as a formal examination).
- **The chair, student or examiners can ask for a break at any time.**
- **The student may be informed of the broad areas** the examiners wish to cover during the viva.
- **The student should provide a short verbal summary of the project.** In some cases it may be helpful for the candidate to use audio-visual aids such as PowerPoint for this summary (up to five minutes). Not all rooms can accommodate audio-visual equipment so it is the responsibility of the student to notify the relevant administrator dealing with the viva, of their requirement before final arrangements are confirmed.
- **The examiners then lead the discussion of the proposed research** with a view to establishing whether the student has met the requirements outlined in 'Aims of the viva' above. It is customary to invite the external examiner to take the lead role in such questioning.
- **The student should be asked to leave the room while the panel discussion takes place.** This is after the panel has concluded its questioning and discussion of the research, or at such time that the chair of the panel regards there to be no further purpose served by continuing the period of questioning. The chair should ask the student to return when the panel has completed its deliberation.
- **If the panel is able to reach a decision as to its recommendation to the Graduate School Board of Studies, the chair should inform the student of the decision** with the external examiner also giving verbal feedback.

The decision

The examiners must not introduce new issues during deliberation that were not raised during the viva.

The panel does not have the power to offer progression directly to the student, but instead makes a recommendation to the Graduate School Board of Studies (via the examination report).

It is not always possible to reach a decision regarding the recommendation by the end of the viva. In cases where panels are unclear as to how the regulations should be understood, it is far better for them

to delay the decision regarding the recommendation and seek advice from the Graduate School than to make a recommendation that subsequently proves to be inconsistent with the regulations.

On completion of the assessment, the panel will prepare a report making one of the following recommendations to the Graduate School Board of Studies:

1. The student should **progress** (or transfer in the case of a transfer viva);
2. The student should **revise and resubmit for re-examination without a second viva**;⁴
3. The student should **revise and resubmit for re-examination with a second viva**;⁵
4. Following re-examination, the student should not transfer but should instead **be registered for MPhil only** (available only to transfer viva panels);⁶
5. Following re-examination, the submission is not of an appropriate standard so the **student should not transfer or progress** (the student's registration will therefore be terminated by the Board); or
6. The student should be considered under the University's **malpractice regulations**.

Resubmission

Where the panel decides that revision and resubmission is necessary, the Graduate School Board of Studies notes, rather than approves, the decision so the student need not wait to hear from the Board to begin their revisions. Following this recommendation, the student is permitted to make one submission of revised work.

The examiners must provide written feedback to the student – via the faculty research degree administrator – regarding the changes required using the prepopulated [specification of revisions: progression/transfer viva \(RO-GRA-25F\)](#) **no later than five working days after the viva**; this should not specify actions to be taken but simply indicate general deficiencies, and is separate to the chair's report.

Resubmission must be to the faculty research degree administrator within eight weeks for full-time students or twelve weeks for part-time students, from the date on which the student receives this written feedback.

Only one resubmission is permitted. Where an application is rejected for the second time:

- MPhil registration may be maintained in the case of MPhil/PhD students, but
- registration will be terminated by the Board in the case of students who were initially registered for PhD or professional doctorate study.

⁴ Where the student's original submission was made after the submission deadline, the initial viva must be considered a second sitting. In such circumstances, the option to revise and resubmit is not available.

⁵ See previous footnote.

⁶ The student's final viva submission deadline will be recalculated by the Graduate School to reflect the change of programme.

Additionally, in the case of MPhil/PhD students, the panel may decide that the work is not of an appropriate standard for MPhil registration. In such cases the Graduate School Board of Studies can terminate registration.

Re-examination

Where possible, the same viva panel should reconvene to assess the resubmission and, where a second viva was the original viva panel recommendation, conduct the viva. A second chair's report will be required for the Graduate School Board of Studies.

It is important that the panel only considers deficiencies that were identified in the first examination, and does not introduce new issues or lines of questioning other than those that arise directly from the revisions. Determining whether an issue is a consequence of revisions is a matter of academic judgement.

The panel can, however, pursue any matters raised by answers given by the student in a second viva.

If no new issues are raised by new material, revisions, or answers in a second viva, and the student has addressed the matters raised following the first viva, there is no reason not to recommend the progression of the student.

Paperwork and communication of the decision to the Graduate School

In addition to any written feedback that is given to the student by the examiners, the chair must complete a [viva chair's report \(RO-GRA-03F\)](#) and submit it to the Secretary of the Graduate School Board of Studies (via the faculty research degree administrator) within **ten working days of the viva**.

While the *examiners'* post-viva feedback, created using the [specification of revisions: progression/transfer viva \(RO-GRA-25F\)](#), will be passed to the student, they will not normally receive the *viva chair's report* (which is a procedural report written for the Board rather than useful feedback for the student). However, there are circumstances in which one or both of these reports may be made available, uncensored, to the student or other appropriate body e.g. following a subject access request by the student, or if the Office of the Independent Adjudicator requests them.

Guidance updated: 05 November 2019

Appendix: summary of responsibilities for the progression viva

Role	Responsibilities
Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit/resubmit to the admin by the deadline • Notify the admin of any A/V requirements at an early stage
Faculty research degree administrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange viva chair • Book room, arrange water • Greet the external examiner on arrival • Act as central contact point for viva: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Receive the submission/resubmission and check it is complete ○ Distribute the submission/resubmission ○ Send confirmed viva details to panel and student ○ Pass examiners' feedback to student ○ Pass chair's report to Graduate School • Provide paper on all vivas to each Graduate School Board of Studies
Viva chair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete viva chair's report • Submit chair's report via admin within 10 days
Supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Complete an exam team for proposal and submit it to the Graduate School. • Agree date and time for viva with student and other examiner • Act as subject specialist examiner
All examiners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submit joint written feedback for student via admin within 5 days (where applicable) using the specification.