

Final viva guidance

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

As with most research degree matters, the process for final viva is fundamentally the same across all research degrees, although there are some differences according to the research degree on which the candidate is enrolled:

	MRes	Professional doctorate	PhD
Submission deadline¹	12 months (full-time) 18 months (part-time)	72 months	48 months (full-time) 72 months (part-time)
Submission	Dissertation	Thesis	Thesis
Word limit²	30,000	55,000	80,000

Please note: the term 'thesis' is used in this document to refer to both the doctoral thesis and the MRes dissertation.

This should be read as a supporting document to the Research Degree Regulations which outline the regulatory requirements for research degree examinations.³

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¹ Number of months after initial enrolment that submission for final viva must be made (excluding adjustments due to intercalation). Submissions must be provided no later than 23.59 on the deadline date. The Graduate School will notify candidate of the exact deadline date shortly after first enrolment. This period is the maximum but submissions are generally expected earlier (details can be found in the Research Degree Regulations).

² This is the maximum word limit; the actual expected word limit will vary by project and may be much shorter in some cases.

³ <https://www.edgehill.ac.uk/documents/research-degree-regulations/>

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Viva arrangements

The organisation of the viva is the responsibility of the Graduate School. The supervisory team will agree a date and time with the examiners and candidate for the viva to take place normally within six weeks of the submission, while the administrator will arrange a chair, book the room, or, in digital cases, set up the link.

Composition of the viva panel

All examiners must be research active and have had no prior involvement with the project. The examiners must collectively have two previous examinations at or above the level of the degree sought e.g. one examiner may not have examined previously as long as the other examiner has examined on two previous occasions.

The final viva examiners **must have been proposed by the supervisory team and formally approved** by the Graduate School Board of Studies **before the candidate submits** for final viva. This normally approved 3 months prior to submission. The viva cannot take place without this approval.

The final viva panel comprises:

- an independent chair appointed by the Graduate School from an approved list;
- a member of staff with no prior connection to the project;
- an examiner external to the University with relevant subject knowledge; and
- if the candidate is an Edge Hill member of staff, there will be an additional external examiner.

For MRes: The internal examiner may chair the viva, provided they have undertaken the viva chairs' training and are therefore on the list of approved chairs. Otherwise, the Graduate School administrator will arrange for a chair from the list.

Role of the viva chair

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

- the appropriate academic regulations are followed;
- all substantive matters raised in the pre-viva reports are considered in the viva, and that the candidate is given the opportunity to respond to questioning on each issue. To then ensure that each of the substantive matters raised in the pre-viva reports is reflected upon in the examination panel's deliberation, such that any matters that the panel feels remain unresolved are included in the required amendments or revisions, and that the final recommendation reflects the nature and scale of those unresolved matters;
- 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 record of the event should something go wrong.⁴

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

In the event of major amendments, minor amendments, or revise and resubmit for examination recommendations the chair should be consulted by the examiners to ensure that the amendments, or deficiency guidance, provided is clear on what the candidate is required to do.

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

Documentation

The final viva submission simply takes the form of the thesis, with a title page and abstract. Candidates can find the full specifications in [Research Degree Regulations, Schedule A](#).

The examiners each submit a pre-viva report to the Graduate School at least 2 weeks before the viva. This gives time for the Graduate School to identify significant matters of concern among the examination team, and for the examiners to read each other's reports.

While the examiners' *post-viva feedback* will be passed to the candidate, they will not normally receive the examiners' *pre-viva* reports (which allow the viva panel to establish areas of interest in the upcoming viva) or the *viva chair's* report (which is a procedural report written for the Board rather than useful feedback for the candidate). However, there are circumstances in which any or all of these pre- and post- viva reports may be made available, uncensored, to the candidate or other appropriate body e.g. following a subject access request by the candidate, or if the Office of the Independent Adjudicator requests them.

Minor amendments, major amendments or revise and resubmit recommendations

The viva panel will need to complete a joint [specification amendments/revisions form](#) to provide feedback to the candidate. For **minor and major amendments**, the report should identify specific amendments that are required to achieve the award. For **revise and resubmit** recommendations, the examiners will provide written guidance to the candidate, via the Graduate School, on the deficiencies of the examination. Such guidance will not specify a series of actions to be taken by the candidate, but simply indicate general deficiencies

⁴ 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.

Aims of the viva

The viva panel should seek to establish that the candidate meets the criteria for the relevant award as outlined in N2.1 of the Research Degree Regulations. If all of those criteria are met, there is no reason not to award the degree.

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. Final vivas last as long as the examination panel feels is necessary. In cases where a viva is likely to last longer than one would normally expect, the chair should ensure that there is a break at an appropriate point.

Before the viva

The chair and examiners should:

- note the range of possible outcomes from the viva, found in the Research Degree Regulations. The chair should ensure that the examiners consider the correct set of options i.e. those for the relevant degree and the relevant examination (first examination or re-examination);
- remember that the viva is an integral part of the examination, so they must not tell the candidate their decision before the viva is completed – a recommendation to the Graduate School Board of Studies can only follow the viva;
- set the agenda for the viva based on the pre-viva reports, ensuring any obstacles to success are discussed in the viva. This should be done by identifying all matters raised in the pre-viva reports that constitute, at that point, a reason not to award the degree. The candidate must be given the opportunity to address such issues, so the agenda for the viva must ensure that those issues are put to the candidate:
 - including all substantive matters from the pre-viva reports is a minimal requirement for ensuring that the viva is conducted properly, and therefore will not provide grounds for an appeal;
 - in the course of the pre-viva discussion, or during the viva itself, other substantive matters may arise. Those must be put to the candidate, and the candidate's responses should be considered during the panel's deliberations at the end of the viva;
 - in preparing for the pre-viva meeting, it is useful for chairs to arrive having already considered what they regard as the substantive matters identified in the pre-viva reports. That reduces the length of the pre-viva meeting, but does not avoid the requirement to discuss it with the examiners;
- agree how the panel will manage the detailed questioning;

- remember that the examiners' joint post-viva report must address the (substantive) concerns⁵ raised in their pre-viva reports, making it clear whether the candidate dealt with them satisfactorily in the viva or should do so through amendments or revisions to the thesis; and
- remember that the candidate can only be asked to make amendments or revisions (other than trivial corrections)⁶ 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 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, candidate or examiners can ask for a break at any time.**
- **The candidate may be informed of the broad areas** the examiners wish to cover during the viva.
- **The candidate 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 candidate 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 candidate 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 candidate 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 candidate 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 candidate of the decision** with the external examiner also giving verbal feedback.
 - The date of formal conferment of an award and its associated title is the date of approval by the Graduate School Board of Studies. It is at this point that the award is made, and therefore only at this point that a candidate receiving the award of a doctorate can adopt the title, 'Doctor'.

⁵ Substantive concerns are any matters on which the award of the degree hinges.

⁶ The Research Degree Regulations distinguish between corrections, amendments and revisions. Occasional typographical errors, factual errors in the text that can be easily rectified, inconsistencies with the format of the thesis as specified in Schedule A of the Research Degree Regulations, and minor grammatical errors are indicative of the kinds of things that would require corrections. *Significant* linguistic, factual or formatting errors would require amendment or revision, so must be addressed or the University will reject the recommendation for award until that has been done.

- Graduation ceremonies are held at the University each July and December and the date of award will determine to which ceremony successful candidates are invited.
- If the viva takes place in the morning, the Graduate School administrator will usually have arranged lunch vouchers for the examiners and the chair and, in the event of a successful outcome, the candidate and Director of Studies.

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 an award directly to the candidate, 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 a recommendation to the Graduate School Board of Studies. In the event of major, or minor, amendments or revise and resubmit, the [specification of amendments/revisions form](#) should be completed by the examiners in consultation with the chair. Full details of the possible recommendations can be found in the Research Degree Regulations.

It is important that panels consider the list of recommendations in the [Research Degree Regulations](#) when deciding which recommendation to make to the Board, not only the summary below.

In relation to the options available to examination panels, the following points should be considered:

- **Recommendations to the candidate** in relation to preparation of the work, or elements of the work, for publication. These have no bearing on the outcome of the examination and should not be confused with amendments or revisions. A candidate may be awarded a degree without having to make any amendments, where the examination panel has made recommendations in relation to preparation of the work for publication.
- **Corrections.** Occasional typographical errors, factual errors in the text that can be easily rectified, inconsistencies with the format of the thesis as specified in Schedule A of the Research Degree Regulations, and minor grammatical errors are indicative of the kinds of things that would require corrections. The completion of any corrections required by the examiners must be approved by the internal examiner before an award can be made.
- **Amendments.** In determining whether amendments constitute major or minor alterations to the thesis, it is first necessary to consider whether the required amendments can be completed in the relevant timeframe. It is important to remember that amendments, unlike revisions for resubmission, *are not re-examined when completed*. Instead, the internal examiner simply checks that the candidate has provided something that constitutes a response to each of the requirements listed in the formal feedback outlining the amendments. That has consequences

for what does and does not constitute an amendment, as opposed to a revision. Examiners must be satisfied that the thesis is of sufficient quality to warrant the relevant award without their being able to re-assess (and therefore without them having the potential to reject *on grounds of quality*) the amendments. It is possible for the internal examiner to conclude that the changes made by the candidate *do not constitute a response*, however the internal examiner and candidate are encouraged to communicate with each other during the process of altering the thesis in order to avoid such a situation.⁷

- **Minor amendments** must be completed **in the case of PhD and the Professional Doctorate within three months**, and within six weeks (forty-two days) **in the case of MRes**, regardless of whether the candidate is registered part-time or full-time. Typical examples of the kind of thing that might constitute a minor amendment are alterations to the layout or ordering of the text, or the inclusion of material covering things that were discussed in the viva, and which would improve the quality and coherence of the thesis. Generally, if examiners feel that only minor amendments are required, they should be very confident of the candidate's ability to make the alterations necessary. While the award is conditional on the amendments being made, a thesis that results in minor amendments should be very close to the required standard for the award *before* the amendments are made. It is important that examiners recognise that if a potential change to the thesis *is not* something on which the examiners feel the award should depend, then it should simply constitute a *recommendation* to the candidate, rather than an *amendment*.
- **Major amendments** must be completed **in the case of PhD and the Professional Doctorate within 12 months**, and within **three months (90 days) in the case of MRes**, regardless of whether the candidate is registered part-time or full-time. Typical examples of the kind of thing that might constitute a major amendment are alterations that require the candidate to do additional work albeit work that the examination panel has good reason to believe the candidate is capable of completing. Alternatively, the candidate may be given major amendments simply because there is a significant volume of relatively minor matters that need to be addressed, such that the overall volume of work cannot be completed within the above timeframes. In determining whether changes to the thesis constitute major amendments or revisions for resubmission, examiners should remember that *amendments are not re-examined*. The distinction between major amendments and revision for resubmission (where those revisions are not overly extensive), therefore rests on the panel's confidence in the candidate's ability to make the required changes to the relevant standard *without the need for re-assessment*.
- **Revisions for resubmission**. It is important to note that there is no difference in the timeframe available to candidates required to make revisions for resubmission when compared to those required to make major amendments. That means determining whether revisions for resubmission are necessary is not a matter of the volume of changes required (the same volume of work could constitute major amendments). Instead, the key factor is whether the changes to the text require re-assessment by the examiners in order to determine whether the candidate has met the criteria for the award of the degree sought. Because the revised thesis will be significantly substantively different, an additional viva examination of the new material and its

⁷ While the candidate and internal examiner will be in direct contact during the amendment stage, the final submission of the amended thesis should be sent to the Graduate School examinations inbox

impact on the thesis as a whole is required. The examiners will provide written guidance to the candidate, via the Graduate School, on the deficiencies of the examination. Such guidance will not specify a series of actions to be taken by the candidate, but simply indicate general deficiencies. This is important because the candidate will be re-examined on the revised text, and therefore should not be provided with assistance in revising the thesis by detailed specification by the examiners of what is required;

- **No award.** That no award is made and that the candidate may not be re-examined. The examiners will prepare an agreed statement of the reasons for their recommendation which will be communicated to the candidate via the Graduate School;

N.B. where the panel decides that either amendments or resubmission are necessary, the Graduate School Board of Studies notes, rather than approves, the decision so the candidate need not wait to hear from the Board to begin carrying out changes to the text.

Examiner reports

- In cases of amendments or revisions, if the recommendation is clear and agreed by all, the examiners must produce a joint formal statement to the candidate of the required amendments or revisions, using the [specification amendments/revisions form](#), so they need to agree how it will be drafted and approved. The chair should be consulted in this process.
 - For **minor and major amendments**, the form should identify specific amendments that need to be made to achieve the award.
 - For **revise and resubmit** recommendations, the examiners will provide written guidance to the candidate, via the Graduate School, on the deficiencies of the examination. Such guidance will not specify a series of actions to be taken by the candidate, but simply indicate general deficiencies
- In cases where the examiners cannot agree, they must produce individual reports, and the final decision as to what action should be taken will be made by the Graduate School Board of Studies, which may exceptionally involve an external adjudicator.
- Examiner joint statements/reports must be provided– via the Graduate School administrator – **within five working days of the viva.**

Viva chair's report

- In addition to any written feedback that is given to the candidate 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 Graduate School) within **five working days of the viva.**
- The completion of the viva chair's report is a technical exercise, designed to provide a written record that demonstrates that the viva has been conducted according to Edge Hill's Research Degree Regulations and procedures (such as this guidance).

- The chair's report should not, therefore, contain rambling description of everything and anything that one might say about the viva. Instead, it should identify the key substantive issues drawn from the pre-viva reports, pre-viva meeting, and any additional substantive matters that arose in the viva. It should then indicate the examiner's judgement in relation to those matters, show how those judgements are connected to the recommendation to the Board, and record any unusual events that took place during the viva. No further information is normally required in the chair's report.
- It is crucial that any major matters highlighted in the examiners' pre-viva reports be addressed in the viva chair's report. However, as noted above, there may be other substantive matters that arise in the course of the viva, or the pre-viva discussion. Those must also be addressed in the viva chair's report. This is important because being able to demonstrate that all matters influencing the recommendation have been considered and have directly informed the recommendation is essential to demonstrating that the viva has been conducted within the regulations, and therefore to ensuring that the result is not vulnerable to appeal.

Re-examination

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

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 candidate in a second viva.

If no new issues are raised by new material, revisions, or answers in a second viva, and the candidate has addressed the matters raised following the first viva, there is no reason not to recommend the award of the research degree sought. Similarly, if any issues arise from new material, revisions, or answers in a second viva are ultimately addressed satisfactorily, there is no reason not to recommend the award of the research degree sought.

Guidance updated: 08 December 2021

Appendix: summary of responsibilities for the final viva

Role	Responsibilities
Candidate	<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
Graduate School Administrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arrange viva chair • Book room, arrange water/set up link • Act as central contact point for viva: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Receive the submission/resubmission and check it is complete ○ Check through the examiner pre-viva reports ○ Distribute the submission/resubmission ○ Send confirmed viva details to panel and candidate ○ Pass examiners' feedback to candidate ○ Pass chair's report, and specification, to Graduate School • Meet the PGR prior to examination • 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 5 working days • Support the examiners to complete the specification amendments/revisions form (where applicable)
Supervisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propose examination team to Graduate School Board of Studies prior to thesis submission • Agree date and time for viva with candidate and examiners • Greet the external examiner on arrival (where necessary)
All examiners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each submit a pre-viva report <i>at least</i> 2 weeks prior to the viva. • Submit joint written feedback for candidate via admin within 5 working days using the specification amendments/revisions form (where applicable)