

## **04.10**

# **GUIDELINES ON THE CONDUCT OF VIVA VOCE AND ORAL EXAMINATIONS**

# CARDIFF METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

## GUIDELINES ON THE CONDUCT OF ORAL (VIVA VOCE) EXAMINATIONS

### Introduction

1. Some Institutions attempt to define separately the terms Oral Examination and Viva Voce. The University uses these terms interchangeably, both orally and in written documents, and any attempt to distinguish between the two may not be fully effective in practice. However, two discrete categories of oral examination or viva voce have been defined below for the purpose of establishing guidance on the conduct of such examinations.

### Categories of Oral Examination or Viva Voce

2. Oral examinations or vivas have two distinct purposes:

#### **Category 1**

An examination of an element of a programme involving oral means of communication, being part of the normal method of assessment prescribed in programme documents, normally applicable to the whole cohort of students on that programme. *Examples include: presentations for individual modules; demonstrations; requirements of professional bodies; oral examinations for PhD or MPhil candidates.*

Procedures and guidance will be specified in relevant programme documents (e.g. The Research Studies Manual contains information on vivas for MPhil and PhD candidates).

#### **Category 2**

An examination that may be used to assist in determining the overall result or progression for an individual candidate, in addition to the normal methods of assessment. *Examples include: resolving borderline cases, resolving doubts over the grading of a candidate in a single unit of assessment or an overall classification.*

This category also includes an oral examination/viva used as an alternative, or as an addition, to the normal method of assessment for an individual candidate in exceptional situations, to show whether relevant learning outcomes have been satisfied.

3. Vivas held as a form of "quality control" (e.g. benchmarking of standards, or establishing whether a piece of work is the own work of the candidate) should be re-designated as "interviews", and students should be advised that such interviews are not part of the assessment.

4. **The following principles, guidance and procedures apply to the second category of vivas in 2 above, but may also help to inform individual programme procedures for those in the first category.**

### **General Principles**

5. Methods of assessment should be devised that will normally enable Examination Boards to decide on outcomes for individual students without the need for vivas. A viva will then be held only where a doubtful issue can not be resolved by the application of the normal assessment criteria.
6. Vivas should not be held unnecessarily or for any purpose other than to resolve problems of assessment or grading. Candidates who have clearly failed an award should not be allowed to pass as a result of a viva.
7. Procedures should be transparent, fair, applied consistently within and between Schools, and carefully documented.
8. No candidate shall be disadvantaged by undergoing a viva. Marks and/or classifications can only be revised upwards as a recommended outcome of a viva.
9. Where vivas are used, programme documents should include clear statements on: (i) why vivas are used; (ii) how and by whom students are selected; (iii) the composition and powers of the viva panel; and (iv) how individual results may be affected by vivas (e.g. to adjust the results on specific elements of assessment or to adjust the overall classification).
10. Vivas should only be held before the Examining Board which determines the student's progression or award and classification.

### **Membership of Viva Panels**

11. The viva panel should consist of at least two and no more than three examiners, of which one should be an external examiner.
12. At least one member of the panel shall have had previous experience of conducting a viva.
13. Where reasonably practical, the panel members should not all be of the same gender.
14. An additional member of staff from the School may attend as recorder where appropriate. Observers are not permitted.

### **Notification to students**

15. All students should be informed in writing (e.g. in Programme Handbooks) at the start of the session of the range of dates during which vivas will be held, and the method of communication by which individual candidates will be invited to attend a viva. Students should be reminded of their responsibility to make themselves available to attend if invited to do so.
16. Individual students selected to attend a viva should be informed at least two working days prior to the day of the viva.
17. Individual students must have the opportunity to be prepared for their viva. Each individual student to be invited to attend a viva should be provided with a standard summary sheet containing the following information:
  - The purpose of the viva
  - When and where the viva will be held
  - A named person for the student to contact with any query
  - The constitution of the viva panel
  - The powers of the viva panel
  - How the viva will be conducted
  - An indication of what is expected of students and the type of questions they will be asked.
  - The likely length of the viva
  - What to do if unable to attend and the consequences of non-attendance without good reason.

### **Information to Members of the Viva Panel**

18. For consistency in the conduct of vivas, members of viva panels should be provided with the following information:
  - The powers of the viva panel (including the nature of recommendations that may be made to the Examination Board)
  - Relevant extracts from the University's regulations and/or programme handbooks or other relevant documents
  - Relevant samples of the student's work
  - A copy of these guidelines
  - General guidelines on interviewing (e.g. how to proceed where students are showing signs of distress)
  - Guidelines on the length of vivas

### **Before the Viva**

19. Students and members of the viva panel should be given the information in 17 and 18 above.
20. The viva panel should decide in advance what areas of the student's work will be discussed, and why this area has been selected. The

focus should be on specific assessments and should not be too general or wide ranging in nature.

21. Members of the panel should decide in advance who will chair the viva and be in overall control of the proceedings.
22. The panel should discuss and decide on the line of questioning before the viva. The following is considered good practice:
  - The use of open rather than closed questions, to give candidates the opportunity to demonstrate ideas, knowledge and ability.
  - The use of simple questions rather than complex questions consisting of several parts.
  - The avoidance of leading or hypothetical questions, which can be unproductive.
  - The use of questions covering a range of issues, rather than those limited to a single topic, but which should be strictly relevant to the purpose of the viva.

### **The Conduct of the Viva**

23. The Chair should greet candidates, confirm their identity against their ID cards, ensure they are comfortable and attempt to create a relaxed atmosphere, especially where a candidate appears nervous.
24. Topics should be introduced and questions asked without long preambles to questions - ideally examiners should talk as little as possible, should listen to and should not interrupt the candidate without good reason.
25. In the context of the University's Equal Opportunities Policy, the following is considered good practice:
  - Whilst identical questions to each candidate may not be appropriate, each candidate should be asked questions of a similar nature.
  - Assumptions on matters of race, gender etc should be avoided when asking questions or making comments.
  - Patronising language or inappropriate body language should be avoided.
  - Panel members should be aware of potential difficulties for candidates whose first language may not be English or Welsh, even though they will have met the University's minimum standards in English Language on admission.

- Panel members should maintain eye contact with the candidate whilst communicating (this is especially important in cases of candidates with speech difficulties such as stammer).
26. Disagreements between members of the panel must not be discussed in the presence of the candidate.
  27. The Chair should remain in control of the proceedings and deal promptly with any difficult or undesirable situation.
  28. The candidate must not be given any indication, directly or indirectly, of the likely outcome of the viva. Value judgement words (e.g. excellent, good) after a candidate's response should be avoided, as these could be misinterpreted by the candidate to indicate a favourable outcome.
  29. The candidate should be advised when the last question is being asked, and the viva should be ended formally.
  30. Vivas should not exceed 30 minutes.

### **Non Attendance at Vivas**

31. If the viva is being used to assist in determining the overall award (e.g. borderline cases), no penalty shall be imposed for non attendance and no recommendation shall be made to the Examination Board (see 8 above). The candidate will effectively have disadvantaged him/herself by having lost the opportunity to improve performance through non-attendance.
32. If the viva is being used as an alternative to the normal method of assessment in exceptional circumstances, non-attendance should be penalised with a mark of zero.

### **Records of Vivas**

33. Concise written records of vivas should be maintained, including the date, time and length of the viva, the general line of questioning and answers, the recommendations of the viva panel to the Examination Board and a summary of the reasons for the recommendations. Record keeping is essential in case of any subsequent appeal after the Examination Board.
34. Written recommendations should be submitted to the subsequent Examination Board.