

# EPC Training Module

## Introduction

This module provides information about the role of examination panel chair for PhD, Professional Doctorate and Published Work viva voce examinations. It describes the regulations that frame the role and provides a series of case studies to enable you to explore the scope of the chair role.

There are 7 main parts to the module; each has a series of multiple-choice questions to check your understanding. The module also provides 2 additional parts with information to support you as an exam panel chair.

## Part 1 - The Examination Panel Chair (EPC): What and Why?

The EPC is a 'safe pair of hands', a neutral party charged with ensuring that the exam is arranged and conducted in accordance with the Research Degree Regulations. EPCs were introduced at the OU some 20 years ago. Before then, the internal examiner also acted as chair. The dual roles meant divided attention, and there was no independent oversight of the proceedings; hence, this did not satisfy the important role of the EPC as we know it now:

- Ensuring fair play;
- Looking after the welfare of the student (and panel);
- Ensuring adherence to the regulations, and helping examiners to interpret the regulations appropriately;
- Facilitating informed consensus regarding the outcome;
- Documenting the audit trail, and hence providing important independent information should any issues arise.

The EPC is now a key part of an exam panel, and the experience of a nominated EPC is considered when the Progress Board assesses the Exam Panel Nomination (EPN) form. For example, where a nominated examiner has supervisory experience but not examination experience, it is expected that an experienced EPC will be nominated.

The role of the EPC starts when the examination panel is approved by the Progress Board and the EPC is notified by email. The notification email also includes the names and contact details of the examiners, the student and, if requested by the student, an observer who is normally one of the student's supervisors.

The Open University uses an administration system called PGR Manager for the examination. Emails will come from [no-reply-pgr-manager@open.ac.uk](mailto:no-reply-pgr-manager@open.ac.uk). EPCs can view the details of a student's examination on the system once the appointment has been confirmed.

Guidance can be found here: (<https://www.open.ac.uk/students/research/forms-and-guidance#P>)

and here: (<https://www.open.ac.uk/students/research/ou/services/pgr-manager-advice>).

At this stage, after the student has submitted, and examiner acceptance forms (or emails) have been completed and submitted, all panel members will receive the thesis. Whilst it is not necessary for the EPC to read the thesis, since the EPC is not examining the student and should not influence the views of the examiners, the EPC should check that the thesis is a monograph (as is required by the Open University regulations) and check that any non-book components included have been declared on the Candidate Declaration Form. If there is a non-book component included and not declared, the EPC should contact the Research Degrees Team as soon as possible for advice.

The role of the EPC ends when the final, corrected and accepted thesis is deposited with the library – it is important to note that this could run to 18 months or more if the exam outcome is 'resubmission', which includes a second viva and, potentially, further thesis corrections.

The following sections explain examination arrangements, communications among all parties, reporting requirements on the day (before, during and after the viva), what happens next, reasons to halt an exam, and what happens if the examiners cannot reach agreement. These sections are followed by two scenarios that are designed to test your understanding and to provide you with opportunities to make decisions as an EPC. The final section is a depository for all the forms and key contacts referred to within this course; it will provide you with the information that you need, or could draw on, in your role as an EPC.

## Part 2 – Making the Arrangements

### Part 2a - The Mechanics of the Examination

The EPC is responsible for ensuring that the exam is arranged: date, time, room booking, catering arrangements. There are different approaches to this across the University and in the ARCs. In some areas, the EPC makes all these arrangements; in other areas, an administrator makes the booking arrangements once the date is agreed. Either is fine, but the EPC is responsible for ensuring that the arrangements are made and *are appropriate*.

The exam arrangements are entered into PGR Manager by the EPC. While PGR Manager sends a notification to the examiners confirming this date, invitations should also be sent outside of the system, e.g., via email.

At this point, the EPC should check that all examiners can log into PGR Manager and, if the student has already submitted, can view the electronic thesis. Any issues should be directed to [PGRManager@open.ac.uk](mailto:PGRManager@open.ac.uk). Although hard copies of these are no longer required from the student, the Research Degrees Team can help, if a printed copy is requested by a panel member.

The following navigates a route to arranging the exam:

1. *Save the date*: The date of the exam cannot be arranged until the exam panel has been approved, the EPC and internal examiner have accepted their roles by email, and the external examiner has completed and returned the External Examiner Acceptance Form. This returned form acts as a contract between the University and the external examiner, which ensures that the external examiner role is carried out and in accordance with the OU regulations. Once all examination panel members have accepted their roles, the dissertation will be sent out, and the date can be arranged.

2. *Accommodation*: It's a good idea to book a room as soon as the date is set. Consider carefully where the exam should take place – the environment matters:

- *Light*: A room with natural light is beneficial – we've all experienced rooms with no windows, and they can be oppressive – we must think of the student's and panel's comfort.
- *Sound*: Try to identify a room that has reasonable internal acoustics (e.g., is not echoey) and will not be disrupted by external noises (e.g., plumbing, mechanical noises, loud discussions). Privacy is key for the process, so a room in a quiet area is beneficial.
- *Air*: Is the room well-ventilated?
- *Size*: The size of the room is important. Consider the number of people attending the viva. The minimum would be the three panel members and the student; that could be augmented with a second external examiner

and an observer – make sure that the room is large enough and has appropriate furnishing to ensure comfort for all.

- *Equipment:* In addition to appropriate seating and tables, there may be a need for a whiteboard (or equivalent) and/or for projection, depending on whether the examiners agree to a presentation, or the student needs to display data or demonstrations. Ensure that the equipment is working, and all necessary connectors are in hand.
- *Special requirements:* Does the student (or any of the panel members) have special needs (e.g., wheelchair access) that must be accommodated?
- *Location:* Is there a toilet nearby? Is there somewhere for the student and observer to go during the post-viva discussion?
- *Configuration:* In arranging the room, bear in mind: The EPC needs to be able to make notes and observe without intruding unnecessarily on the interaction between the Examiners and student. It is also important that any observer present is out of the line-of-sight of the student. The observer is likely to take notes, so should have access to a work surface. Try to face the student away from distractions (such as busy windows). If appropriate, arrange for an 'exam in process' sign for the door.

3. Timing: Morning or afternoon exam? Some areas of the University have a standard pattern – typically in the morning or typically in the afternoon – but the travel requirements of the examiners and the student should be considered. The disposition of the student should also be considered; for example, nerves can preclude eating, and in this case an afternoon exam could mean hunger and low sugar levels and reduce the performance of the student.

Note that there is no fixed duration for a viva; it takes as long as it takes. And so sometimes return travel arrangements must change.

Whether the viva is arranged for morning or afternoon, there still must be sufficient time for the pre- and post-exam meetings.

4. Refreshments: It is a good idea for refreshments to be available during the exam, in the interests of the comfort of those present in the room. Fresh water is a minimum, but it is entirely appropriate to provide tea/coffee/juice.

Only members of the exam panel (i.e., EPC and examiners) may attend the lunch. Lunch can be scheduled before or after the exam (or if appropriate be taken during a break), depending on the exam timing. If before, lunch can be used to accommodate the pre-exam meeting. If required by the examiners, a supervisor may be asked to come into the meeting to answer a specific question only, but must then leave and may not stay for lunch. If lunch is arranged after the viva, it must only be the exam panel, even if the exam is concluded and the recommended outcome has been delivered to the student.

The Research Degrees Team will book any catering on campus. This is requested through the exam arrangements form on PGR Manager. (N.B. Alcohol is not an appropriate provision.)

## Part 2b – Communications

Safeguarding the integrity of the exam is a vital aspect of the EPC role, and in turn communication is vital to integrity. The EPC is the funnel through which *all* communications relating to the exam are channelled. The supervisors and student must not communicate with the Examiners and *vice versa* – *unless through the EPC*. Similarly, the Examiners should not confer, except through the EPC. This may sound draconian, but any unmediated communication could be interpreted as compromising the integrity and independence of the panel – thereby putting the examination process in jeopardy.

The EPC should explain this to all parties at the outset of the exam arrangements. The EPC must act as the communications conduit until the role ends, regardless of how long the role lasts.

There may be a need for an Examiner to examine remotely. For example, this may be due to a non-national location, or disability or injury precluding travel. There are three considerations here:

1. Is the student happy with the Examiner joining remotely?
2. Will a two-location exam disadvantage the student in any way (e.g., consider time-zones and, therefore, exam timings)?
3. Will the equipment be failsafe in terms of audio, video, bandwidth etc.?

It is required that the EPC, the student and the Internal Examiner (and observer where applicable) are co-located, and, if there are two External Examiners who wish to examine remotely, they must be co-located, so that there is just one video link and not two. (Any variations from this must have a strong motivation and be approved in advance by the Progress Board.)

If as EPC if you are unsure, then contact the Research Degrees Team, who will be able to advise. This should be done by email, rather than on PGR Manager; although you can confirm on PGR Manager if the videoconference has already been approved by the Progress Board. The regulations (RD 19.6) require a case to be made to the Progress Board, confirming (in summary, here):

- that the student has consented in writing;

- that the technology is reliable and effective, and there are plans, and a timeline, for testing to ensure that the exam will not be interrupted by equipment failure;
- that the Faculty or ARC accepts responsibility for equipment provision and testing;
- that contingency arrangements have been made, should the equipment fail on the day, and that the contingency is of a comparable standard to 'Plan A'.

The student consent should include the contingency arrangement explicitly. Otherwise, should the contingency be invoked, the arrangement must be discussed and agreed with the student.

## Part 3 – The Week Before the Examination

The EPC should ensure that the pre-viva reports have been submitted by each Examiner on PGR Manager at least five days before the examination. Once they have all been submitted, PGR Manager should automatically share the reports among the Examiners. The EPC should check that the examiners do have access and ensure that they have sight of each other's reports before the pre-exam meeting. Neither the supervisors/observer, nor the student, may see the pre-viva reports.

The EPC should also remind all examiners that any feedback or corrections should be listed separately from the dissertation document. Only typographical errors that are not deemed necessary to the award may be provided to the student on a copy of the dissertation. It is recommended that Examiners bring an electronic list to the pre-viva discussion (or email it to the EPC), as all other corrections must be added to the electronic Examination Report Form. Failure to do this may lead to delays in the ratification of the exam report.

It is also recommended that the EPC check in with the student and the observer (if there is one) before the day of the viva to ensure that the student is in good health and to ask if there are any questions or concerns about the process. The EPC should also take the opportunity to recommend that the student brings appropriate materials with them to support their thesis defence and aid their comfort, e.g.: notebook and pens/pencils, copy of their thesis and any non-book component(s), supporting documents that may be helpful, any materials accepted for publication or conference presentation, preferred soft drinks, confectionary, etc.

If the viva includes remote examination, then the videoconferencing – and backup videoconferencing – arrangements must be checked with all sites in advance of the day of the viva.

This would also be a good time to re-state the arrangements: timings, room, who is collecting which participant from where and when.

## Part 4 – On the Day

### Part 4a – Pre-examination

The EPC is responsible for the day, from pre-exam meeting through viva to post-exam meeting, including communication of the recommendation to the student and ensuring that the Examination Report Form is completed. The EPC Aide Memoire provides a framework to help. The work starts before the viva, as follows:

1. Right-to-work checks: Please note that right-to-work checks are now carried out by People Services at the appointment stage. The EPC will not usually be required to have any part in this process; however, failure of the external examiner(s) to complete the right-to-work check will mean they will not be able to take part in the examination, and it may have to be postponed. On occasion, checks may be done on the day of the exam, but this requires additional time. So the EPC should check in advance that the right-to-work check has been completed; the Research Degrees Team can provide this information.
  
2. Arranging the room: Recommendations are made in the 'accommodation' section in Part 2a, but the EPC should factor in time before the pre-exam meeting to arrange the room.
  - a. If any participants are joining remotely, final videoconference checks should be made as outlined in the request for a videoconference viva.
  - b. If using catering, ensure that the delivery time is sufficiently in advance of the exam start time to avoid disruption or a late start – or that there is a drop-off point outside the exam room. (Please ensure that you do not deviate from the agreed drop-off/pick up point, as catering will charge for all 'lost' crockery/cutlery.)
  
3. Pre-exam meeting: Ideally, the examiners should have enough time to conduct their pre-exam meeting without delaying the start of the exam – in order to avoid creating additional anxiety for the student.

There is another side to this - the meeting needs to take as long as it needs to take, which is also in the interests of the student. So it is important for the EPC to know where the student and observer are and how to contact them if the session is longer than anticipated and hence let them know that there will be a delay.

It would be helpful to indicate a typical duration (e.g., 1 hour) - depending on whether the pre-viva reports largely indicate alignment among the examiners. It can also be helpful to ask the examiners if the suggested amount of time is enough.

Note that it is acceptable to hold the pre-viva meeting before the day of the viva, depending on the examiners' travel arrangements and availability. (For example, during covid when exams were remote, it was common to hold the pre-viva meeting the day before, when the technical checks were conducted.)

a. *Preliminary assessment:* The EPC should facilitate a discussion of the thesis between the examiners and encourage them (i) to explain their preliminary assessment in terms of pass/fail/somewhere between, and (ii) to explore common ground and differences of opinion at this stage, based on the reading of the dissertation. It is appropriate for the panel to take time here to explore any major disagreements (usually evident from the pre-viva reports), so the examiners go into the exam knowing what key input they need from the student in order to reach agreement - and hence prioritising those key issues in the plan. This type of discussion provides the EPC with an understanding of the approaches of each examiner – and whether the examiners are unanimous/non-unanimous at this stage – and hence with an indication of how the exam might unfold: forewarned is forearmed!

b. *Roles/plan:* The panel should also discuss how it wants the viva to proceed, in terms both of prioritisation of questions, and examiner roles. As long as there is an agreed approach, including which are the key points for exploration, then the format is determined by the examiners. There are many different approaches, for example: priority order, chapter-by-chapter, or theme-by-theme. The exam should cover all aspects of the thesis (note that 'coverage' can simply be an acknowledgement that an aspect is satisfactory). And different panels use different dynamics, e.g.: the external leads, the examiners take turns, the examiners decide who leads on specific topics, etc. The outcome of the meeting should be an agreed plan or agenda for the viva.

c. *Supervisor/observer:* The observer is *not* included in the pre-meeting. If the examiners have a particular question to pose to a supervisor, they can do so, but the supervisor must only be invited in for that question and then will leave. It is appropriate for the EPC to ask at the start of the pre-viva meeting if there are any such questions. And the EPC should know where the supervisor/observer is waiting and how they can be contacted efficiently.

## Part 4b – The Examination

Unsurprisingly, the EPC chairs the viva: ensuring fair play and balanced discussion, attending to the student's wellbeing, overseeing compliance with the regulations,



keeping track of progress against the agenda, calling for periodic breaks appropriately, keeping notes, and so on.

1. Introductions: Invite the student and observer (if there is one) in and indicate where to sit, ensure they have water, and give them time to arrange themselves and their materials. Avoid making the student feel under scrutiny at this stage.

When the student is ready:

- Introduce yourself as the chair.
- Explain that the chair is a neutral party, that your role is to oversee the proceedings, to ensure that the exam is in accordance with the regulations, and to keep a record of proceedings.
- Introduce the examiners and explain that they will conduct the exam.
- Note that you will be suggesting breaks at intervals, but that the student (or anyone else in the room) may ask for a break at any time, may ask questions, or may just ask for a pause to think.
- Explain that, once questioning is complete, the student will be asked to sit in another room nearby with the observer (if there is one), whilst the examiners decide on the recommended outcome.
- Explain that the observer's role is to observe and take notes, and that the observer is expected to remain silent unless the examiners or EPC ask otherwise explicitly.
- Ask if the student has any questions.

Then get going!

2. Time-Keeping: The EPC monitors the time, and it can be useful to let the examiners know when they have reached one hour, and then subsequent hours, so that they can keep track of progress through the questions. However, there are no minimum or maximum times for the viva.

3. Note taking: There is an 'aide memoir' document that the EPC can use to record key details, but it is also useful to note anything that the EPC may consider pertinent if the student perceives that due process was not followed. For example, it can be helpful to note: start, break, and finish times; moments when clarification was requested by the student and how it was provided; procedural questions by any participant; etc.. Take time to consider whether you will take notes using a laptop or paper and pen/pencil. Each has advantages (e.g., speed of capture) and disadvantages (e.g., noise).

4. Intervention: During the questioning, the EPC is usually quiet, but may very occasionally intervene in order to help the proceedings, e.g., if there is a miscommunication that can be resolved simply, or discussion has lingered too long

on one question, or the observer is speaking without invitation. Ideally, such interventions are not required.

5. Breaks: Regular breaks are useful in pacing a viva and enabling all to function at their best. Times vary, but many EPCs suggest breaks every hour – and the EPC should make clear that anyone in the room can request a short break as needed. Breaks can also be used as an intervention tool, e.g.,: if the EPC has concerns over the student's welfare, if there is 'heat' between the examiners, if the observer is misbehaving, if there is a need to consult the regulations or the Research Degrees Team, etc. – many issues can be addressed calmly during a break. If the student is visibly uncomfortable, a break can allow the EPC to discuss any concerns with the student and/or with the examiners. Similarly, ensure that all participants feel free to access any refreshments in the room.

6. The Observer: The observer's role is to support the student. The observer usually takes notes that act as an aide memoir for the student. The observer must not interject or communicate in any way with the student or examiners during the viva, unless invited to do so by the EPC or one of the examiners. The EPC has the right to ask the observer to leave if the observer is acting outside of their role.

7. End of questions: When the examiners have finished questioning, if the examiners have not already asked if the student has any questions for the panel, then the EPC should do so. The EPC then explains that the panel will discuss the viva and a recommendation, and asks the student and the observer to leave the room. The EPC should either know or ask where the student and observer will wait, so that they can be called back promptly. It is helpful to tell the student that the discussion may take some time (e.g., for comfort breaks, form-filling, etc.), but that the duration does *not* correlate with the outcome.

## Part 4c - Post-examination

After the viva, the EPC facilitates the discussion between the examiners and keeps notes of key elements of their assessment and reasoning. The student and observer (if applicable) will have left the room, and the examiners will discuss the possible outcomes based on the student's thesis and defence. This can be facilitated in different ways, but the following works well:

1. Discussion: Encourage the examiners to discuss their thoughts freely; this provides the EPC with the opportunity to gauge whether unanimity is likely, and which of the seven possible exam outcomes best suits the examiners'

assessments. Take notes of any key issues or revisions discussed; this can help later in drafting the Examination Report Form.

2. Identifying and aligning the outcome: Once this has started to conclude (or when requested) provide the examiners with the list of possible outcomes (as per the Regulations or the Examination Guidelines) and ask which they feel is appropriate. Consider whether you feel this aligns with their discussion.

It's helpful to have a laptop linked to a shared display, so that the outcomes and the forms can be shared during the discussion.

If the examiners are unanimous, check with them that the outcome matches their intentions, i.e., that their interpretation of the outcomes aligns with OU thinking. For example, if they recommend revisions, what do they think is required to bring the dissertation up to the required standard? Make note of the revisions. Do the revisions align with the definition of minor corrections or substantial amendments – noting that different universities interpret 'major' and 'minor' revisions differently?

3. Pursue unanimity: If the examiners are non-unanimous, the EPC needs to work toward unanimity; this may require compromise and another round of examiner discussions whilst the EPC draws on the possible outcomes in the regulations/guidelines, and on the pre-viva reports and the EPC's notes of the viva. It is imperative that the decision is unanimous before concluding this meeting, and that the EPC facilitates the decision while remaining neutral. (What to do on the rare occasion that the examiners cannot agree is addressed in section 6b.)

4. Quality: An important point is that the recommendation is based solely on the quality of the work, *not* the time needed for revision (if any). To be clear, these are two separate concerns: (i) what is required to bring the thesis up to the correct standard – which is the appropriate basis for the recommendation, and (ii) how much time the student needs for the corrections given personal circumstances – which should *not* affect the recommendation but can be addressed separately. For example, if the recommendation is minor amendments, but the student needs more than three months due to exceptional health/work/domestic circumstances, then the EPC can request an extension of the time for revisions from RDRAC (the Research Degrees Ratification of Awards Committee).

5. Examination Report Form: Most panels complete – or at least draft – the Examination Report Form during the post-viva meeting, depending on how long the discussion has taken. The EPC's notes, pre-viva reports, and a shared display can be helpful here, because most panels anticipate the contents of the Examination Report Form in their discussions. Completion of the Examination Report Form is discussed further in Part 5.

6. Pay attention to time: It's worth bearing mind that there is a nervous student (and supervisors) waiting to hear the outcome. Once a unanimous decision is made (including any revisions), decide who will announce it to the student. (This depends on the panel; sometimes it's the External, sometimes the EPC, sometimes the Internal.)

7. Communicate the recommendation: Bring the student and observer back into the room.

The designated panel member will deliver the recommended outcome.

The EPC should explain clearly to the student that this is a *recommendation* and not a final outcome; it must be assessed and ratified by RDRAC, based on the pre-viva reports, as well as the examination report.

Where revisions are recommended, they may be outlined for the student. This is often done by the EPC, working from a notes agreed with the examiners, but it may be offered by an examiner.

Explain that, where corrections are required, the timescale for them to be made starts on receipt of the letter from the Research Degrees Team with the list of corrections. It is important to note that the Examiners should not provide the student with a written list of corrections after the exam, because – like the outcome recommendation – the recommended revisions need to be ratified by RDRAC.

Once the recommendations and process have been communicated, ask if the student has any questions.

The student may take annotated theses away after the exam, and the observer may talk through the corrections that they may have recorded in their notes – all on the clear understanding that the student should not commence revisions until the student receives the ratification letter.

## Part 5 - Report and Ratification

The Examination Report Form needs to be completed collectively by the examiners. Typically, the EPC facilitates filling in the form on PGR Manager (again, a shared screen helps), often extracting relevant material from the pre-viva reports as directed by the examiners, referring to notes from the viva and post-exam discussion, and/or typing from dictation. PGR Manager shares the form with the examiners to check and confirm. The process must be completed within 48 hours from the end of the exam.

The Examination Report Form is typically completed during the post-exam discussion. Sometimes (e.g., if the discussion took longer than planned) it is

completed after the recommended outcome is communicated to the student. Note that the recommended outcome should not be communicated until the panel has completed its deliberations, i.e., there is clear agreement about the recommendation and any required revisions.

Sometimes examiners ask for 24 hours to reflect on the report or to clarify details; in this case, the EPC must ensure that the process is completed, with confirmation by all examiners, within 48 hours of the end of the exam.

Typographical errors may be annotated on an electronic copy of the thesis and submitted with the Examination Report Form. Corrections above the level of typographical errors must be stated explicitly in the Examination Report Form and, if typographical corrections are deemed essential to the award of the degree (as opposed to suggested only), they must also be stated explicitly in the Examination Report Form. All colleagues involved in supervising and in examining PhDs are reminded that dissertations are uploaded to ORO and are a matter of public record.

It's also worth reiterating here that the recommendation is based on quality, *not* on how much time the student has available for any corrections. If a student needs additional time, for extenuating work/domestic reasons, then the EPC should request this from RDRAC separately.

Where the recommendation is substantial amendments, all examiners must check the corrected thesis; be sure to list all the examiners in the relevant field. For minor corrections, it is sufficient for the panel to nominate one examiner (often the internal).

Once the report has been submitted and confirmed by all examiners on PGR Manager, it will be sent to the Research Degrees Team. The EPC should ensure that all the forms are completed to a satisfactory level of detail, and that the list of corrections is written with clarity, so that the student knows what is required in each point.

The forms for recommended outcomes other than 'resubmission' or 'fail' (i.e., pass, minor corrections, substantial amendments, resubmission, MPhil subject to revision, resubmission for MPhil) are reviewed by the Chair and two members of the Research Degrees Ratification of Awards Committee (RDRAC). If the outcome is 'resubmission' or 'fail', the forms are reviewed by the Chair and six members of RDRAC. In the majority of cases, the process is straightforward: the recommended outcome matches what is required by the student to bring the thesis to standard. There are cases where information is missing (for example, incomplete forms, or ambiguous statements), in which case RDRAC will ask the Research Degree Team to

contact the EPC for clarification. The EPC could draw on notes made during the exam and/or go back to the examiners for clarification or more information. Ultimately, it is better for the EPC to ensure that the paperwork is in order before going to RDRAC, because any request by RDRAC for information delays the student receiving their outcome letter with their corrections.

Most requests for clarifications from RDRAC relate to required and suggested corrections. For example, if changes are required (including typos), they need to be listed clearly, so that they can be both understood by the candidate, and checked by the examiners. This can include grouped corrections, e.g., 'the word "rhythm" is misspelled throughout chapter 2, please correct'.

If changes are *suggested* (rather than required), they can be covered in broader text – because the examiner is not obliged to verify that these changes have been made.

It should be re-iterated that, during this part of the process and those that follow, all communications must go through the EPC, including requests for clarification on any of the required corrections. The EPC may also wish to keep in contact with the student and supervisor during the thesis correction period, to remind them of the submission deadline and also to monitor if additional time is required due to changing circumstances after the exam. If this is the case, then the EPC should contact the Research Degrees Team for advice. It is good practice to keep records of all communications, as part of the audit trail.

The student's deadline for corrections is calculated from the date of the outcome letter from the Research Degrees Team.

## Part 6 - Exceptional Issues

### Part 6a - Reasons to Halt any Part of the Examination Process

Purposefully, this is not covered in Parts 4a-c because the reasons for considering halting an exam could appear long before the exam! The best thing that an EPC can do is raise whatever issue is spotted with the Research Degrees Team, who can quickly refer the issue to the Progress Board for a decision. It is important to note that the EPC is not the decision-maker here – but is the gatekeeper for the process and is responsible for raising anything (real or perceived) that could compromise the integrity of the exam. Some of the examples below could be countered with "oh, it

won't matter", but it *could very well* matter if the student made a complaint and it had to be upheld on the grounds that it was *perceived* to matter. Always err on the side of caution, and raise concerns with the Research Degrees Team.

These are real examples from 2017-2019:

1. *Run up to the exam*: If any of these applies, you need to raise them and discuss how to proceed with the Research Degrees Team. Any one of these may result in the Chair of RDC cancelling the exam and asking for a new panel nomination:

- a. Did the student or supervisor send out an electronic copy of the thesis directly to an examiner?
- b. Did the student or supervisor communicate with the examiners about the thesis?
- c. Check the 'acknowledgements': are any of the Examiners or members of their research team acknowledged for assistance with any of the thesis work?
- d. Is the thesis a collection of manuscripts and not a monograph? (This would not conform to OU requirements and so should not be examined.)
- e. Have the examiners compared pre-exam reports before submitting them to the EPC? Did the examiners communicate about the exam without mediation by the EPC?

2. *The day of the exam*: If any of these is a 'no', then the exam should not proceed.

- a. Did the External Examiner complete the right to work check with People Services?
- b. If an overseas student has arrived in the UK for the exam - does the student have the correct visa?
- c. If using a video-link, is it still functioning effectively enough to conduct the exam?

If 'yes' to any of the following, then the exam should not go ahead.

- d. In the pre-viva meeting, listen: did the External Examiner describe teaching the student at undergraduate level or hosting the student as an intern at any point? Did any other undeclared conflict of interest emerge?
- e. Did an examiner reveal that they did not read the thesis?
- f. Do any of the examiners or the student appear to be intoxicated, under the influence of drugs, or too ill to participate?

g. Did the student walk out of the exam and refuse to return? A student is required to attend the entire exam; if they walk out, the exam ends, and the student fails.

This is not an exhaustive list, but it provides a flavour of what we have experienced. Anything that meets the 'flavour' of this list should be run past the Research Degrees Team, and, if sufficiently serious, it will be directed to the Progress Board. They are there to support EPCs in difficult times and are keen to help to resolve matters to help the EPC to ensure the best experience and outcome for the student.

## Part 6b - When Examiners Cannot Agree

Very rarely, the examiners cannot agree on a recommended outcome.

This is truly the rare exception. Usually, disagreements between examiners can be resolved through discussion, when the basis of their differences can be explored, and adjustments can be made for differences of perspective, prioritisation, etc. Sometimes, disagreement comes down to interpretation of (or disagreement with) the Regulations – often, this can be resolved by the EPC (who can clarify the intention and interpretation of the regulations), or by the Research Degree Team (who can provide clarification of OU norms), or by RDRAC. Often, the EPC can identify the essence of the discrepancy and find a way to bridge it, for example, by asking about underlying assumptions, interpretations, working practices in the examiners' institutions, differences of perspective in different fields. It can help to identify and articulate the crux of the issue (stripping it down to the core) – and hence what the minimum resolution would be, etc. Sometimes, it can help to ask each examiner precisely what would be required to move their assessment one step closer to the other examiner's assessment (e.g., Why is this a resubmission, rather than substantial amendments?). Sometimes, the EPC can suggest or reiterate alternatives for the examiners to consider. Sometimes, just taking a break can give examiners a chance to reflect and consider priorities. Unfortunately, sometimes the examiners simply cannot agree.

There are regulations pertaining to non-unanimous decisions.

If agreement cannot be reached on the day of the examination, then the EPC must arrange a new meeting with both/all of the examiners to seek a resolution. The student must be informed that the examiners have not reached agreement, and that there will be a delay in communicating the recommendation. No further detail about the nature of the disagreement may be conveyed to the student or supervisors; the discussion must remain confidential within the panel and RDRAC. The length of the delay will depend on further conversations and may be substantial.



It is essential for the EPC to take effective notes throughout the examiners' discussions.

Where the examiners remain adamant in their views and there is no resolution, the EPC should submit a report of the meeting(s), together with the examiners' separate reports and recommendations, to RDRAC.

RDRAC may:

accept the decision of the external examiner;

appoint an additional external examiner;

or, if there are more than two examiners, accept a majority decision.

It is the EPC's responsibility to liaise between RDRAC and the examiners and ensure that the examiners, the student and the supervisors are kept abreast of the situation.

## Part 7 – Scenarios

### Scenario 1

#### **Scenario**

The viva voce for Daniel Bond, a part-time student based in Bournemouth, is due to take place in two days' time. Because Daniel is an Associate Lecturer, he has two external examiners. Dr Jameson is travelling to the Walton Hall campus from Oxford. Dr Knowles is travelling to Milton Keynes from Aberdeen the day before the viva and will be staying overnight at a local hotel.

You have just received a message from Dr Jameson stating that, as a consequence of domestic issues, he cannot attend Milton Keynes for the viva but is willing to participate remotely. What do you need to do in order to facilitate this request?

#### **Discussion**

All examiners must participate in the oral examination. It is expected that the viva voce examination will take place face-to-face with all of the participants in the same location. However, in exceptional cases where a member of the examination panel is unable to be physically present at the examination, a case may be made to the Progress Board for the viva voce examination to go ahead using video conferencing.

The EPC is responsible for submitting this request to the Progress Board prior to the viva voce examination. The request must include the following;

- a) signed consent from the student that they are happy to proceed with an examination in which Dr. Jameson is participating by video conference;
- b) confirmation that the student, the observer (if applicable), the EPC, and the second external examiner will be co-located for the duration of the examination;
- c) confirmation that reliable and effective technology (typically video conferencing facilities) is in place, and there is someone present who knows how to use it;
- d) confirmation that there are reliable and effective video conferencing facilities at the location from which the external examiner is participating, and that these are used as the means of conducting the examination remotely;
- e) confirmation that the Open University Faculty will accept responsibility for the technical arrangements for the viva voce examination;
- f) description of the contingency arrangements in place should the technology fail on the day. The backup should be of a comparable standard (e.g., Teams, Skype or telephone conferencing). Please note however that video conference is the requisite means of conducting a viva voce examination with a remote participant. Where a contingency is put into place, the arrangement must be discussed and agreed with the student.

Where this cannot be arranged you may have to reschedule the viva and inform Dr. Knowles prior to his departure from Aberdeen.

The Research Degrees Team will be able to provide advice as required.

## Scenario 2

### Scenario

The viva for Jane Begum took place yesterday. The outcome was not unanimous. The preliminary reports did indicate that there might be variation in opinion as to the quality of the thesis. The internal examiner considered that the thesis should pass subject to minor or substantial amendments; the external examiner indicated that the thesis was flawed, needed significant revisions and that a resubmission and re-examination was the best possible outcome.

Unfortunately, Jane was very nervous, and she did not respond well to the questions put to her. She became visibly distressed, and at one point you had to suspend the viva to allow her and her supervisor/observer some time to regroup. Ultimately her defence of the thesis did little to allay the concerns of the external examiner. The result was that the examiners failed to agree on an outcome. The viva ended without a recommendation, and the student was informed that the matter would have to be referred to RDRAC.

This morning you received an email from Jane's supervisor in which he states that he has told Jane to submit an appeal. What do you do next?

## **Discussion**

This is an answer with two parts:

- (a) dealing with the non-unanimous decision; and
- (b) preparing for the potential appeal.

### Non-Unanimous Decision

There are regulations pertaining to non-unanimous decisions. Importantly, the matter must remain confidential within the panel and RDRAC; although the student must be informed that the matter is being referred to RDRAC and what the process is, no details may be shared.

The first thing that you should do as EPC is to arrange a new meeting with both of the examiners and seek a resolution. Where the examiners remain adamant in their views and there is no resolution, the EPC should submit a report of the meeting(s), together with the examiners' separate reports and recommendations, to RDRAC.

RDRAC may accept the decision of the external examiner; or appoint an additional external examiner; or, if there are more than two examiners, accept a majority decision.

As EPC, it is your responsibility to liaise between RDRAC and the examiners and ensure that the examiners are kept abreast of the situation.

### Potential Appeal

Currently, Jane has no grounds for appeal, as she has not been informed of the outcome of the viva. There is therefore nothing against which she can appeal until the outcome is ratified by RDRAC. Once the outcome is agreed, she may be able to appeal, providing that she has procedural grounds. Please note that a student cannot appeal against academic judgment.

Jane could submit a complaint about the conduct of the viva, if she felt that there were sufficient grounds on which to do so.

A potential appeal/complaint against an examination is always considered at the formal stage of the process (stage 2). As Jane cannot appeal against academic judgment, should the outcome be resubmission and re-examination, she may look for other grounds for appeal. These are generally procedural. It is therefore critical that you keep notes of what happened at the viva, as it is highly likely that you will be interviewed by those appointed to investigate the appeal.

You may also wish to inform the Associate Dean Research (ADR) about the potential for an appeal/complaint. The best interests of Jane should be paramount. If Jane

does have grounds for a complaint/appeal, then at the appropriate time she should be supported by the Faculty to submit the required documents to the Student Casework Office. However, care must be taken that this is the correct course of action for Jane. Jane will most likely be very disappointed by the outcome of the viva and the potential recommendation of the external examiner. It may take Jane some time to come to terms with the outcome. It is therefore important that you let the ADR know if there are potential grounds for a complaint or an appeal so that they can ensure the correct support is put in place.

Whatever your recommendation it is Jane's choice as to whether or not she wishes to submit a complaint/appeal and she should be provided by the faculty with the support and guidance needed.

## Scenario 3

### Scenario

Whilst completing the final exam report form for Sultana Ahmed (for whom the recommended outcome is pass subject to minor corrections), you are informed by the supervisor that she has a new job and will not be able to complete the corrections in three months. What do you do?

### Discussion

If the recommended outcome (pass subject to minor corrections) is approved by RDRAC, Sultana will have three months from the date of the examination outcome letter to submit her corrected dissertation. However, as the supervisor has told you that this is not possible, you must provide the information regarding Sultana's new job along with the final report form to RDRAC asking them to consider an extension to the deadline.

You should let the supervisors and the student know of your intentions and advise them that, although RDRAC may grant an extension, should they decline to do so, the three-month deadline is strict. Should Sultana not be granted an extension, she must submit her revised dissertation on the due date, or she could risk failing her degree.

## Scenario 4

### Scenario

You are about to chair a pre-viva meeting for the re-examination of Harold Smith. Having received the pre-viva report from the internal examiner yesterday, you are now anxious to see the pre-viva report from the external examiner, who said that he would bring the report to the viva. When you ask for the outstanding report, you are informed that the examiners had had grave concerns over the quality of the

resubmission and had decided that it would be expedient to submit one joint report collating their concerns. What do you do?

## Discussion

The Research Degree Regulations require each examiner to submit a Pre-Viva Report Form to the EPC in confidence and independently of all other parties – including other examiners – at least 5 days prior to the viva. First, the delay in the submission of forms by both examiners should have been managed – and the Research Degrees Team should have been consulted. Second, as the examiners have shared their reports, the regulations have been breached. You must therefore let the Progress Board know immediately, as it may be necessary to cancel the examination and appoint a new examination panel.

## Part 8 - Suggested Timeline for the Examination Day

	Activity	Notes
1.	Pre-viva preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check facilities: make sure there is water, enough chairs, a display screen, whiteboard, etc., as needed. Check ventilation and open windows as appropriate.</li> <li>• Arrange the room: configure table and chairs.</li> <li>• Catering arrives.</li> </ul>
2.	External Examiner Arrives	Collect examiner from reception.
3.	<i>Where not previously completed:</i> Right to Work Check	External Examiner is taken to People Services or Research Degrees Team.
4.	Pre-viva meeting	Panel only: discuss reports and exam agenda. Clarify regulations as needed.
5.	Invite student and observer in	Seat student and observer and allow them to settle.
6.	Introductions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure everyone is introduced.</li> <li>• Explain the roles.</li> <li>• Explain the process.</li> <li>• Invite student to ask questions or request breaks as needed.</li> </ul>

	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Notes</b>
7.	Start the exam	EPC takes notes, moderates discussion as appropriate, notes progress against the agenda, addresses issues that may arise.
8.	Comfort breaks	Introduce breaks as appropriate, e.g., every hour, as requested by someone in the room.
9.	Finish the questions	Timing will depend on examiners' questions and the individual student and examiners.
10.	Transition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain that the panel will confer.</li> <li>• Ask where the student and observer will wait, and how to contact them.</li> </ul>
11.	Student and observer leave the room	
12.	Post-viva meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Panel determines recommended outcomes; EPC takes notes of reasoning and any revisions.</li> <li>• Panel may draft (or complete) the exam report form.</li> <li>• Panel agrees who will announce the recommendation.</li> </ul>
13.	Student and observer return	Call the student and observer back into the room.
14.	Convey the recommended outcome	<p>Explain that the recommendation is subject to ratification by RDRAC.</p> <p>Convey information relating to the outcome, e.g., nature of any recommended revisions, correction timescales.</p>
15.	Complete the Exam Panel Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the report was not yet finalised, Exam Chair consults examiners to complete the report, documents their approval of the final version, and submits the report via PGR Manager.</li> <li>• If there are extenuating circumstances that require extra time for revisions, the EPC submits a request to RDRAC.</li> </ul>