

Guidance on the appointment and role of the Independent Chair

It is a regulatory requirement that all vivas are conducted in the presence of an Independent Chair **and** that all vivas are recorded. This document contains a summary of the role of the Independent Chair. Full details can be found - [Arranging and Conducting vivas - Guide for supervisors and independent chairs](#)

Criteria for the appointment of an Independent Chair

1. The Independent Chair will normally be a member of Royal Holloway academic staff, but not the Executive Dean, and will usually be from the candidate's school. They can be emeritus though this role is not a paid role.
2. The Independent Chair will not be a member of the candidate's supervisory team (including advisor) and will not have played any significant part in the project including progression review or assessment.
3. The Independent Chair will have had experience of supervising at least one Research Degree student through to completion. This experience may be gained outside of Royal Holloway.
4. It is expected that the Independent Chair will normally have had experience of conducting at least two Research Degree viva voce examinations as an examiner.
5. The Independent Chair will be familiar with the Royal Holloway Research Degree examining process, procedures and [regulations](#).

Nomination process

- The Independent Chair should be nominated via the exam entry form at the same time as the examiners, in line with the criteria listed above.
- When considering whom to nominate, please bear in mind:
 - that the Independent Chair role requires the academic to be able to deal with potentially difficult circumstances with confidence, clarity and firmness.
 - where the examiners are both of opposite gender to the candidate, a chair of the same gender to the candidate should be considered.
 - ethnic /racial / religious sensitivity should be exercised where appropriate.
- Check with your PGR Department Lead or Director of PGR Education if there is a department or School pool of Independent Chairs to be nominated in rotation.
- The nomination will be subject to Director of PGR Education's approval. Once approved, the Doctoral School will officially invite the Independent Chair to chair the examination along with the examiners.

Role and responsibilities of the Independent Chair

- In summary, the role of an Independent Chair is to:
 - oversee the oral examination to ensure that the examination is conducted fairly and in accordance with Royal Holloway Research Degree Regulations.
 - Communicate and facilitate any special access arrangements for the viva that have been approved by the disability and neurodiversity team.
 - ensure that the conduct of the viva provides the candidate with an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and to explain/defend their work.
 - where necessary, help mediate between the examiners to identify possible recommendations and facilitate an agreed outcome, but not to provide any academic assessment.
- The Independent Chair is not required to have any detailed knowledge of the thesis and is not involved with the examiners' assessment of the candidate, beyond advising them of the outcome options available to them in the Research Degree regulations.
- The Chair is required to attend the meeting with the examiners prior to the oral examination and be present for the duration of the oral examination and post-viva discussions.
- The Chair is expected to attend in person or hybrid via **in person** rather than remotely. Where this is not possible, they should ensure arrangements are made for the provision of a laptop in the viva room. It is expected that in these circumstances the supervisor will be on hand to arrange this. The candidate and examiners are **not** expected to facilitate the viva recording.

Prior to the viva date

Prior to the viva, the Doctoral School will send the Independent Chair:

- a link to the [Research Degree regulations](#) and [Guidance on the conduct of the MPhil/PhD Exam](#)
- details of any reasonable adjustments to be made to the conduct of the examination under the provisions of the [Regulations on Access Arrangements for Assessment](#)
- an electronic copy of the candidate's thesis for information purposes only. The Chair is not expected to have read the thesis but may find it useful to read the abstract.
- a copy of both preliminary reports. On the rare occasions that the Doctoral School has not received both preliminary reports in time, the Independent Chair will be asked to check in the pre-meeting that any missing preliminary reports have been written and shared with the Doctoral School before the start of the viva. Only then can the examiners then share their reports.
- an '[Independent Chair report](#)' form, which is to be completed at the end of the viva to indicate that the viva has been conducted satisfactorily.
- The chair (and supervisor) will also be sent - [Arranging and Conducting vivas - Guide for supervisors and independent chairs](#)
- If the viva is being recorded online, a link to:
 - [The viva recording deposit folder](#)
- If the candidate has opted for a remote viva via video conference, the Independent Chair will be responsible for the set up and smooth running of the viva. This includes:
 - offering a quick MS Teams meeting with any of the participants who are concerned about using the MS Teams connection so that they feel comfortable with the technology
 - setting up a pre-meeting on MS Teams for the examiners to agree on the agenda for the viva
 - setting up the main viva meeting on MS Teams for the candidate and examiners – and supervisor, if they are attending as an observer
- See [Conducting vivas online - guide for candidates](#) and [Arranging and Conducting vivas - Guide for supervisors and independent chairs](#) for full details.

The role of the Independent Chair at the viva

The Independent Chair should:

1. facilitate any special access arrangements for the viva that have been approved by the disability and neurodiversity team.
2. attend the pre-viva meeting with the examiners and assist the examiners in setting an agenda for the viva and ensuring that the Doctoral School have received both preliminary reports.
3. at the beginning of the viva:
 - introduce the examiners and candidate and outline the format of the examination to the candidate and its key purpose
 - explain that the role of the Chair is to ensure that the assessment processes are operated rigorously, fairly, reliably and consistently and to provide advice on regulations, procedures, policy and practice.
 - Explain any special access arrangements such as agreed breaks for the candidate.
 - Explain that the Chair has a neutral role in the assessment process and takes no part in the actual assessment of the research.
4. ensure that the viva is recorded. No pre or post viva discussion should be recorded.
Make it known to the student, examiners and supervisor (where present), that the recording is solely to be listened to in the event of an appeal. Access will not be permitted for any other reason.
5. ensure that the examination is conducted fairly and in accordance with the University's regulations and policy, including for example:
 - all main items on the agenda are addressed and that the candidate is given the opportunity to respond to all questions asked by the examiners.
 - each of the examiners has a proper opportunity to contribute to the examination process.Exceptionally, the Independent Chair may adjourn/suspend the viva where they have concerns about its conduct.
6. intervene if it is felt that the candidate would benefit from a break, for example if:
 - the viva lasts for more than two hours.
 - the student becomes unwell or distressed.
 - the student has special access requirements.
7. ensure that if the supervisor is present:
 - they only act as an observer and agree to maintain confidentiality in respect of the content of the examination. The supervisor will not participate in the examination of the student unless invited to contribute by the examiners.
 - they are asked to withdraw before the candidate in order to provide the candidate with an opportunity to say anything to the examiners that they would prefer to say without the supervisor being present
8. at the end of the questioning period, asking whether both examiners are satisfied that they have enough information to come to an examination decision regarding the candidate. If they agree, then the Independent Chair should ask the student whether they have any points they would like to raise.
9. stops the viva recording.
10. ensure that the candidate (and supervisor, if applicable) is asked to withdraw from the meeting before the examiners begin their final deliberations.

11. attend the post-viva discussion and facilitate discussion if need be, to assist examiners to reach a decision and to advise the examiners on any procedural matters (e.g. outcomes available to them) as necessary. The Independent Chair should play no role in the actual academic assessment.
12. once the examiners have deliberated, ensure that the actions required of the candidate and the examiners are clear and understood by all parties e.g. that the examiners must return their joint viva outcome report to the Doctoral School within two weeks of the viva.

After the viva

At the end of the end of the viva, the Independent Chair should send the completed '[Independent Chair Report](#)' form to the Doctoral School to indicate whether or not that they are satisfied that the viva has been conducted in accordance with the University's regulations and policy.

The Independent Chair should also **transfer** ownership of the viva recording to the Doctoral School.

- For a viva recorded in MS Teams this is explained in section 10.6 of [Arranging and Conducting vivas - Guide for supervisors and independent chairs](#).
- For an in-person viva, recorded on a hand held device, this should be returned to the Student service Centre, opposite café of the Square (opening hours Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm), or The Doctoral School help Desk (Tuesdays 10am to 4pm).

Comprehensive viva guide for supervisors and Independent Chairs

For more information about the examination process, the viva and the role and responsibilities of the Independent Chair please read - [Arranging and Conducting vivas - Guide for supervisors and independent chairs](#)