

Conduct of Oral Assessments (including Viva Voce Examinations) for Undergraduate and Master's Level Programmes

1. This document provides guidance on the conduct of oral assessments, including viva voce examinations.
2. Oral assessments are defined by Imperial as a conversation or oral presentation on a given topic. Examples of oral assessments might include individual or group conversations, discussions, debates, presentations, poster presentations, and contributions to seminars and spoken language assessments. This category also includes the viva voce examination which is used in specific circumstances, such as for the defence of a thesis or similar body of work (e.g. to test the thesis of a research degree candidate), to determine the final result for the award, in the consideration of borderline candidates or to determine prizes. Vivas must include an external examiner and no-one may attend except the examiners and the candidate.
- 3. Examining Oral Assessments**
 - 3.1. For all oral assessments, the Board of Examiners must determine who should attend, and these must be conducted by not less than two examiners acting together.
 - 3.2. For oral assessments which form part of the normal scheme of assessment (e.g. discussions, debates, presentations, poster presentations, and contributions to seminars and spoken language assessments), it is acceptable for both examiners to be internal members of staff.
 - 3.3. When a viva voce examination is used (i.e. for the defence of a thesis, to determine the final degree result or for borderline/prize purposes) there should be one external and one internal examiner. In exceptional circumstances, where the external examiner is unable to attend the viva voce (e.g. due to illness), a second member of College staff must be present.
 - 3.4. In all cases, the department/programme should inform the examiners of the total possible number of marks available to award the student prior to the assessment.
 - 3.5. Examiners should make a report for the Board of Examiners on each oral assessment which includes a note of the questions asked and a record of why marks were awarded. The report should include a recommendation to the Board of Examiners who shall confirm the final outcome.

4. Notification

4.1. Oral assessments

- 4.1.1. At the start of the autumn term departments/programmes using oral assessments (including when using vivas for the defence of the dissertation) in that academic session should issue students with the following information:
- a) Clear instructions on the use and purpose of oral assessment(s) in their programme;
 - b) Information on when the oral assessment (s) are likely to take place
 - c) The duration and format of the oral assessment(s)
- 4.1.2. Additionally, for viva voce examinations which are used to determine the final result for the award, for the consideration of borderline and/or to determine prizes, students must be told how much notice they can expect to receive (this would normally be at least 48 hours). For undergraduate students such viva voce examinations would normally be within term time. When informing individual students that they are being called for a viva voce examination, departments/programmes should confirm the reasons for this assessment. This will help students to prepare for the viva voce examination in an informed way.

5. Duration and format of Viva Voce Examinations

- 5.1. Students should be provided with information about the format and reason for the viva voce examination in advance.
- 5.2. It is recommended that students are reminded about the purpose of the viva at the start of the examination.
- 5.3. It is recommended that the first five minutes of the viva voce examination should include general questions relating to the students' research interests in order to make them feel comfortable. The examiners would then be free to ask suitable questions to test the student's knowledge of the subject area. However, it is not a requirement to follow this format and examiners are free to choose a structure that is appropriate for the student and to the subject area.
- 5.4. The duration of the viva would be dependent on the nature of the assessment but should typically last between 15 and 30 minutes.
- 5.5. There should be one external and one internal examiner. In exceptional circumstances, where the external examiner is unable to attend the viva voce (e.g. due to illness), a second member of College staff must be present.
- 5.6. Viva voce examinations should normally be conducted in person (i.e. not by telephone or skype, etc.)
- 5.7. No one may attend the viva voce examination except the examiners and the candidate.

6. Viva Voce Examinations for Borderline Candidates

- 6.1. Where viva voce examinations are undertaken to consider borderline candidates these should only be conducted to give students the opportunity to improve their grade. Students should not be moved down a grade as a result of a viva. Departments/programmes may inform students of the borderline for which they are being assessed. There is no requirement for students to attend this type of viva voce examination, although it is in their interest to do so. While no penalty should be applied if a student does not attend the viva voce examination, no further opportunity should be offered for the student to improve their grade.

7. MRes programmes

- 7.1. The assessment of an MRes programme will require at least one oral assessment.

8. Further Information

- 8.1. See [Academic and Examination Regulations](#) for further detail.
- 8.2. For MRes programmes see the [Master's Level Precepts](#) and [Code of Practice for MRes Programmes](#)

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