Guidelines: Viva Voce Examinations for Taught Undergraduate and Postgraduate Programmes

1 Introduction

The use of the viva voce examination can be considered under four categories:

(A) As a part of the approved diet of assessment for a module, as for example:
- Extended pieces of work such as dissertations/projects/theses may be partly assessed by an oral examination.
- Oral examinations are generally used in language modules to test communication skills.
- To test the achievement of professional competencies during or at the completion of a vocational placement.

These assessments should form part of the approved diet of assessment for the module, be designed to test specific module learning outcomes and should be taken by all candidates. External examiners are sometimes involved in these examinations.

N.B. Oral assessments described in (A) above are distinctly different to the examinations which are used for the purposes of determining classification as described in (B) below.

(B) For undergraduate students who entered Stage 2, 3 or 4 of their programmes of study in 2011/12, a means of assisting in decision-making with regard to borderline classifications

Examiners may exercise discretionary powers to require a viva voce examination under certain circumstances to assist decision-making on borderline cases and/or provide an alternative or additional assessment where valid reasons for poor performance [concessions cases] have been established. With respect to borderline cases, examiners will normally focus on specific areas of weakness in the candidate’s performance as might be indicated by poor results in particular module(s) or assessment(s). It should be clear which learning outcomes are under test.

Following regulatory changes, this form of examination cannot be used for students who entered Stage 2 of their programme of study in 2012/13 or thereafter.

(C) Benchmarking

Examiners may use interviews with candidates from across the performance range to monitor academic standards.

N.B. this is an interview not an examination, as the process is not designed to benefit individual students, but to monitor the cohort’s academic standards of achievement.

(D) As part of a disciplinary investigation

A disciplinary committee might require examiners to test students via oral examination in order to authenticate the authorship of pieces of work. Such examinations must take place under the auspices of a disciplinary committee established for this purpose and must not be conducted independently by examiners or by Boards of Examiners.
2 Conduct of the Viva Voce

The purpose of these guidelines is to provide a set of principles in order to achieve good practice in the conduct of viva voce examinations for taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses where there is external examiner involvement in any of the scenarios identified under section B above.

Before the Viva Voce

- Students must be advised why they have been called for a viva, to enable them to prepare in an informed way.
- Examiners should give students as much notice as possible regarding timing and arrangements for the viva voce examination. Examiners should inform students if the external examiner(s) will attend or conduct the viva voce examination and should remind students of their responsibility to attend. Operational arrangements should be clarified as early as possible by the module/programme teaching team.
- Students should be advised of the anticipated length of the examination.
- Where the viva voce is being used to determine borderline or concessions cases, students must be reminded that the viva voce can only be used to raise, not lower, the mark/grade.

During the Viva Voce

- When the student attends for the viva voce, s/he should be verbally reminded of its purpose.
- The purpose of the viva will determine how the student’s viva performance is to be assessed, i.e. what criteria might be used.
- The purpose of the viva voce will determine who should be present. The number of individuals present, while normally never fewer than two members of staff, should be the minimum required to carry out an effective assessment. Examiners should avoid overwhelming the student with an excessive number present.
- A student’s identity should be confirmed against their student ID card. (Note that students are required to have their student ID cards for invigilated written examinations.)
- A brief record of the outcome of the viva should be made.

Outcome of the Viva Voce Examination

- Where viva voce examinations have been used to help determine borderline or concessions cases, the outcomes should be discussed at the relevant Board of Examiners.
- When a student fails to attend a viva voce examination convened for the purposes described at (B) above, s/he will be deemed to have lost the opportunity to improve her/his performance.

3 Vivas for PhD Candidates

The Graduate School provides specific guidance for PhD candidates undertaking a viva examination. This can be accessed via their Online Training page on https://www.kent.ac.uk/graduateschool/skills/onlinetrg/index.html. Note that this is a secure site and a current Kent password is required in order to view this page.

Approved by LTB on 28 February 2007 and updated September 2012