

GUIDANCE ON VIVA VOCE EXAMINATIONS AS A SECONDARY FORM OF ASSESSMENT

A. Principles

1. These Guidelines are applicable to undergraduate students only, and relate to vivas undertaken as a secondary form of assessment specifically to reflect traditional expectations within a subject area. The University of Sheffield's *Code of Practice for External Examiners of Taught Courses* states the following in relation to the role of examiners participating in the award of degree classifications (section 7.5):

“Except where subject practice dictates otherwise, *viva voce* examinations will not normally be held. Exceptions will be subject to approval by the Dean of the relevant Faculty/ies.”

The following guidance therefore does not apply to *viva voce* examinations which are used as a primary means of assessing students' knowledge, for example those used in language and medical degrees.

2. The main role of a *viva voce* examination for secondary purposes of assessment is:
 - a. To inform the determination of borderline final degree classifications

However, a viva voce examination may also be used in other circumstances, such as:

 - b. To inform the determination of borderline module results;
 - c. To investigate anomalous module performance
 - d. To investigate underperformance due to extenuating circumstances
3. It should be made clear to candidates invited to *viva voce* examinations that their existing marks cannot be adversely affected, and that they may benefit from the process if their marks are within the discretionary range.
4. Candidates should be informed that they do not have automatic entitlement to a *viva voce* examination and therefore cannot request such.
5. *Viva voce* examinations are not intended and should not be used to provide evidence for a possible disciplinary procedure.
6. *Viva voce* examinations should not be used simply as an opportunity for external examiners to meet students.
7. Vivas to be held in any specific year will only be held at the discretion of and with the agreement of both the Department and the relevant external examiner(s). They should discuss the selection criteria to be used for candidates to be invited to vivas.
8. External examiners must be given the opportunity to examine candidates' work as appropriate, prior to the *viva voce* examinations taking place.
9. *Viva voce* examinations should not be scheduled after the end of the semester.
10. Where the delivery of a programme of study involves more than one department, the areas over which *viva voce* examinations may be conducted by external examiners should be stated clearly, at the start of the programme, to students and other examiners.

B. Information for Students

1. Candidates should be informed at the start of their programme of study if there is a departmental policy to hold vivas on that programme. In the case of dual degree programmes, this should include a statement of the policy under which external examiners are selected to conduct vivas.
2. Candidates should be made aware that the questions during the viva voce examination may cover any topic from their programme of study.
3. Candidates should be provided with appropriate guidelines on the viva process covering the purposes and format of the examination and possible outcomes (this should normally be outlined within student handbooks).
4. Candidates should be given adequate notice of the possibility of being called to attend a viva, and this should normally be not less than 24 hours.
5. Candidates should be encouraged, but not compelled, to attend a viva voce examination.
6. Candidates should be examined individually.

C. Format and conduct of the Viva Voce Panel

1. Viva voce panels should normally consist of a minimum of two examiners, one of whom must be a formally appointed external examiner, who will act as chair. Departments may use their discretion as to whether they would wish an internal examiner to be present.
2. Questions asked of candidates must be appropriate to the reason for the viva, and related to the learning aims and outcomes of the programme so that candidates are treated equitably.
3. Examiners will seek to establish through the viva voce examination whether, in borderline cases, the student's performance meets the appropriate standard for the award of a higher mark or classification. A student's existing mark or classification will not be downgraded under any circumstances.
4. Accurate records of the questions and answers given should be kept, in order to ensure fairness and as a record of the discussion in the event of an appeal.

D. Action following the *viva voce* examination

1. The findings and recommendations of the viva voce panel should be reported to the relevant Examination Board, which will take them into account in reaching a decision on the candidates' results.

Learning and Teaching Committee

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