

## The University of York

### QAA Code of Practice on Research Degree Programmes 2004 – the University of York and the audio recording of research students' oral examinations.

The Code was received by the University's Board for Graduate schools in October 2004. It was agreed that a comprehensive institutional code of practice should be developed which corresponded to the sections of the QAA Code.

When considering section 23c of the code:

*23c The way in which the viva is to be conducted. Institutions will wish to satisfy themselves that processes enable the viva to meet agreed criteria for fairness and consistency. Some institutions now appoint an independent, non-examining chair: this is thought to be good practice, not least in ensuring consistency between different vivas and in providing an additional viewpoint if the conduct of the viva should become the subject of a student appeal. Where the appointment of an independent chair is not feasible, institutions should find alternative ways of assuring fairness and consistency, acceptable to the student, that enables them to know the viva is conducted in an appropriate manner.*

The Board agreed that an independent, non examining chair at the oral examinations was a drain on resources especially in small departments, and their presence could affect the conduct of the examination. It was decided that the most efficient and effective way to address this issue was to audio record oral examinations. The proviso was that the recording would only be listened to if an appeal was made by the candidate based on the conduct of the oral examination.

After consulting departments in the University on the proposed code, in July 2005 Senate were asked to approve the University's code of practice on research degree programmes. Senate requested further consultation with departments. This was done and Senate received another draft of the proposed code which still advocated audio recording oral examinations. Senate voted against the proposal 2:1. Major objections were that it would change the atmosphere of the viva and external examiners would object.

In January 2006 Senate approved a proposal from the Board for Graduate Schools that a pilot study for the audio recording of research students' oral examinations be conducted. The department of Health Sciences began recording vivas from October 2006. Their experience of recording 7 examinations was used to formulate a procedure for the pilot. This was approved by the Standing Committee on Assessment (SCA) in January 2007. The first recording was on 5 February.

Three departments have taken part in the pilot: Health Sciences, Biology and Philosophy. A further 20 recordings have taken place. A recommendation from the SCA will go to Senate in January recommending that the University adopt the policy of audio recording all research students' oral examinations. The only exception to this policy will be if an external examiner refuses to be recorded and no suitable replacement can be found. In this situation an internal observer from the same discipline will be used and they will submit a written report on the proceedings.