

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER DOCTORAL COLLEGE

Viva Voce Examinations by Virtual Means – Temporary Policy in Response to Impact of Coronavirus Outbreak

Context

Due to travel restrictions and social distancing measures introduced in response to the Coronavirus outbreak, it is necessary to put in place a temporary policy on the conduct of multi-way vivas by electronic means. The University currently uses Microsoft Teams for this purpose. [Note: the Doctoral College is now working with other teams to produce additional guidance for those taking part in vivas, and in particular, for NEICs and internal examiner, including checklists to support the viva. This will include technical information on the software being used, running a test, and how to manage participants joining/leaving/re-joining virtual meetings.]

PGR Support contact: whilst this temporary policy is in place a member of the PGR Support team will be identified as a point of contact for each viva, and examiners will be informed who their named contact will be.

The current policy on [Vivas by Video Conference](#) contained within the TQA Manual is acknowledged to be outdated for the present situation. This will be reviewed and updated in due course. In the meantime, to meet the immediate need to facilitate the continuation of vivas where possible, the following approach to managing multi-site virtual vivas will be implemented, having briefly consulted with the Doctoral College Management Group, and members of the wider community through the Doctoral College Forum. This temporary policy will be kept under ongoing review, and will be formally reviewed after a period of three months. It should be noted that no student should feel they have been put under any pressure by the University to undertake their viva virtually; in the current circumstances, where a student does not wish to undertake their viva virtually, the viva should be postponed.

It is important that the University ensures that students feel supported through the viva process, as much as possible. In this regard points of contact that it might be useful to remind students of include the PGR Support Team, Wellbeing Services, and [Pro-Counselling](#).

Please note that aside from the requirements with regard to holding vivas by electronic means, and the requirements around thesis submission the requirements set out in the [TQA Manual](#) and the [Calendar](#) should still be followed as normal unless an exception has been approved by the Dean of Faculty in writing. Exception requests must be sent to dcqualitydevelopment@exeter.ac.uk and are normally requested by the PGR Support Teams and put forward on the recommendation of the relevant College DPGR.

Reminder: 'A viva may not proceed without all the examiners, and a Non-Examining Independent Chair when appointed, being present⁴. 4: If an examiner is unable to attend the viva should be postponed, or where necessary consideration given to revising the membership of the Board of Examiners (for example where an examiner will be unavailable for an extended period of time). If the appointed NEIC is unable to attend the College should arrange for a substitute NEIC to take their place. If there is not time for the appointment to be approved, the College should ensure that the substitute NEIC is someone who has previously undertaken the NEIC role: as they are not an examiner they need not be a subject expert.

Examiners are reminded that if they are concerned that they may have identified evidence of Research Misconduct they should follow the procedure set out in section 6 of the ['Research Misconduct: Procedure for Graduate Research Students suspected of Research Misconduct'](#).

Conduct of Multi-Site Virtual Vivas

- 1) The College Director of Postgraduate Research¹ should approve arrangements for a multi-site viva examination by electronic means in order to enable a viva to proceed without the need for participants to meet in a single physical location provided that they are able to have confidence that the conditions set out below can be met in each instance. A virtual viva should not proceed without such approval. Where a decision is made to postpone a viva instead the [PGR Support contact](#) should be informed. As the internal examiner is normally responsible for organising the viva they should take the lead on approaching the College Director of Postgraduate Research to manage this.
- 2) Where approval has been given to hold a virtual viva examination, the College is responsible for taking all reasonable steps to ensure that the candidate is not disadvantaged in any way compared to the normal situation of a face-to-face viva. In so doing the College should be mindful of the latest advice available from IT Services with regard to holding virtual meetings. In determining whether or not it is appropriate to conduct any viva by virtual means, the College **must** be able to have confidence that:
 - a. The Examiners will be able to assure themselves that the thesis is the candidate's own work;
 - b. The technology is sufficient to enable a viva to take place without limiting communications, and that arrangements will be made to postpone the viva if this is not the case²;
 - c. All participants are able to access an appropriate, comfortable location for the viva where the probability of interruptions occurring is minimal. To facilitate this participants should be reminded of the need to ensure that they have refreshments and have made appropriate arrangements for their comfort;
 - d. Where an ILP is in place, any reasonable adjustments can be complied with, bearing in mind that the advice set out in an ILP might not have been written for a virtual viva examination. See also '[Before the Examination: Scheduling the Viva](#)' (6.2.3) and '[Assessing Candidates with Disabilities](#)'.
- 3) Addressing these points means that:
 - a. All viva participants (all members of the Board of Examiners, the NEIC (where appointed), the supervisor if invited to be in attendance, and the candidate) must agree in writing to the viva being conducted in this way. The viva must be postponed if agreement is not reached. If the candidate has any

¹ Whilst this will normally be the College DPGR, in accordance with the information set out in the introduction to the TQA Manual, the College DPGR is acting on the delegated authority of the Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean of College. The Pro-Vice-Chancellor and Executive Dean of College may delegate their authority as appropriate to the Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor, Associate Dean (Education), the Associate Dean (International and Development) or the Associate Dean (Research and Knowledge Transfer)/College Director of PGR students as relevant, and this should be noted for resilience.

² Arrangements have been made to provide a space on the Streatham campus where one or more of the participants in the viva, who are able to travel to the University's Streatham campus, and who do not have access to a suitable environment or technology off-campus, might use a digitally enabled, sanitised space on-campus. However, the current level of restrictions on non-essential movement mean that this resource is not currently available. As and when restrictions are lifted more guidance will be made available on the use of this space.

concerns about proceeding in this way they may change their mind prior to the viva without detriment.

- b. All viva participants (all members of the Board of Examiners, the NEIC (where appointed), the supervisor if invited to be in attendance, and the candidate) must confirm, commencing with the candidate, at the conclusion of the viva that the holding of the examination by virtual means has had no substantive bearing on the examination process.
 - c. The Board of Examiners should be mindful of the risk that the viva may need to be halted and should ensure that it agrees an approach to record-keeping during the viva discussions to ensure that the viva could be recommenced successfully at a later date.
 - d. Internal Examiners should contact their [PGR Support contact](#) for advice with regard to organisation of vivas by virtual means.
 - e. The virtual platform for the viva should be tested with all participants ahead of the viva taking place, and approval must always be subject to confirmation of a successful test.
 - f. If an NEIC has not already been appointed, **a Non-Examining Independent Chair must now be appointed.** In addition to the normal duties of the role, the NEIC will be responsible for:
 - i. Halting the viva in the event that the technology fails or is significantly interrupted or is of a poor quality such that participants are not able to fully engage in the viva. This may include halting the viva at the request of the candidate, if there are any indications of problems with the technology being used.
 - ii. If the viva is halted, confirming in writing to all participants that the viva has been postponed as soon as possible;
 - iii. Verifying the candidate's identity by checking ID that the candidate presents on camera to the Examination Board.
 - iv. Keeping a record and reporting to their College DPGR in the first instance should anyone present be unable to confirm that the holding of the examination by virtual means had no substantive bearing on the examination process;
 - v. Ensuring that all participants confirm that they have not kept a recording of the viva.
 - g. Consideration should be given to the need for members of the Board of Examiners (and the NEIC, where appointed) to consult privately on the conduct of the examination. The arrangements for managing the candidate (and supervisor, where relevant) joining/leaving/re-joining the meeting should be set out in advance of the virtual viva.
- 4) Arrangements for halted vivas: If the viva is halted at the beginning of the viva arrangements will need to be made for another viva to take place at a later date. If a viva is halted once the viva is underway, arrangements will normally need to be made to allow the viva to recommence from roughly the point at which it halted at a later date, however, the NEIC will be responsible for making a judgement on whether the viva should recommence later or would need to be restarted completely.
- 5) When confirming approval of the request to hold the virtual viva, the College Director of Postgraduate Research should lodge a copy of the approval with the [PGR Support contact](#) who will ensure that the [Postgraduate Administration Office](#) have a central record of all instances where approval has been given for an examination to be conducted by virtual means to ensure consistency of approach. Examiners should provide feedback on conducting vivas virtually to their [PGR Support contact](#) in order to support review of the policy, and updating guidance to other examiners, if needed.

Professor Andrew McRae
Dean of Postgraduate Research and of the Doctoral College

27th March 2020